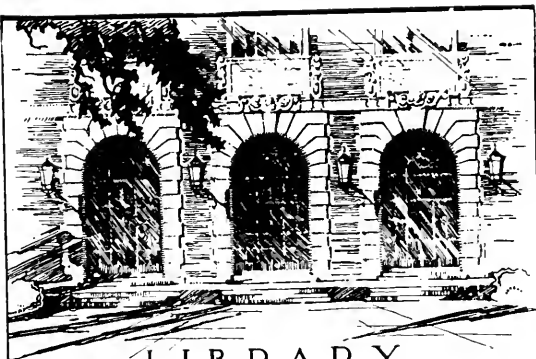


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FERNLEY MANOR,

A NOVEL

BY

MRS. MACKENZIE DANIELS,

AUTHOR OF

“MY SISTER MINNIE.” “THE POOR COUSIN.”

“OUR GUARDIAN,” &c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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FERNLEY MANOR.

CHAPTER I.

CONFESSIONS.

“MARGARET, dear Margaret, guess what I have done,” exclaimed Edith, suddenly entering the room where her sister was sitting alone, after her walk with Mrs. Boisragon.

“I am but a poor guesser ;” replied Margaret, looking up from a letter she was writing, “let me see, what can you have done out of the common way? made a pudding, or examined my pickle jars, that

I brought down for inspection this morning perhaps."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Edith, quite impatiently, and seating herself on Margaret's foot-stool, "look here," holding out her hands, which were still tremulous from agitation, "would making a pudding or examining pickles cause my young, strong fingers to shake in this way?—Margaret, I have fixed my fate for life; I have engaged myself to Alick Boisragon."

"Edith, you are joking;" was the exclamation of the elder sister, as she pushed aside her writing materials, and gazed, with deep anxiety, into Edith's flushed and excited face.

"On my soul, I am not," said Edith, who was evidently annoyed and angry at Margaret's incredulity. "I have promised to marry him, and I *will* marry him—Why should I not?"

"I am not aware of any great obstacle to it *if you love him*;" was the grave and rather sad reply, "but *do* you love him

sufficiently to become his wife, my dear, dear Edith ? oh I fear greatly you have deceived yourself."

"No, I have not done that, Margey," said Edith, in a gentler tone. "I am perfectly clear as to the state of my own heart, and I have the fullest conviction that the step I have taken is a right and a prudent one. If I do not, at present, love Alick so devotedly as he loves me, it is of little consequence, for I have a sincere affection for him, I pity him from my very soul, and I desire earnestly to promote his happiness—I never dreamt till now how pure a joy there could be in occasioning great happiness to another, in having at all times the means of bringing light to the eye, however languid, and buoyancy to the spirit, however depressed. Margey, if you had seen poor Alick when I told him I would really be his wife (for *I* made the proposal) you must have felt and acknowledged that it is far sweeter to confer pleasure than to receive it."

“Edith, my own dear child, you have so astonished and bewildered me, that I know not what to say first. My impression is that, in spite of your present satisfaction, this engagement, so suddenly and strangely entered into, will turn out ill. Inordinate love on one side, and little on the other, cannot be productive of happiness. Alick Boissonragon, though a most amiable and interesting character, is not the husband for you. He is far too romantic—too imaginative—and not sufficiently firm or self-relying. Had he never met with that terrible accident, he might—I think he *would*—have turned out differently. It is not his intellects that are impaired, as he himself sometimes apprehends; it is his character—his moral energies, that are weakened, I fear, for ever.”

“So much the more reason, Margaret, that he should have some one to love and cherish him—to be to him his second self—to guide and console—to cheer and support—He loves me beyond everything

else in the whole world, and it is for me to atone to him for the unkindness of destiny."

Margaret shook her head.

"If you loved him, Edith, you might do this, and find your own happiness in so doing ; but believe me, his love for you, however fervent, will never give you, courage, through long years of married life, to act the part you propose."

"It will—it will, Margey ; and it will do more than this, for it will very soon win my whole heart—I feel it—I know it—do not doubt me, my own Margey, when I tell you, on my honour, that I am quite happy in the fate I have chosen, and that *nothing*—no nothing should tempt me to revoke what I have done."

"Then Heaven prosper your work," said the elder sister, with unusual solemnity. "I will urge no more against it, Edith, and now tell me when and how all this is to be accomplished ?"

So Edith, still sitting at her sister's feet,

repeated to her the plan she had before suggested to Alick, entering into fuller details than she had done to him, and convincing Margaret that however suddenly she had put the seal to her destiny, the idea of it must have been, for some time, struggling towards maturity in her mind. It was the opinion of both sisters, that Major Lascelles ought to be immediately consulted in the matter ; and Edith, though nearly worn out with the excitements of the day, determined to go to him at once, there being still an hour to spare before dinner.

The major was seated as usual in an easy chair, with a newspaper in his hand, when his daughter entered the room he called his own.

“ Papa, dear,” she said, approaching near enough for him to see and hear her. “ I have something very particular and important to talk to you about—Are you ready to listen to me ?”

“ Quite ready, of course, my dear,”

replied the quiet father, looking a little uneasy at this address.

“Well then, papa, have you ever thought of the possibility of my marrying, and leaving you? I am now nearly twenty, remember.”

The poor major's countenance became of an ashy whiteness at these words, and in a voice of mingled fear and excitement, he replied,

“Oh don't Edith—pray don't. I have not many years to live—not long shall I stand between you and any hopes you may have formed; but my child, your old father begs you not to leave him—not to desert him at this eleventh hour—It would kill me, you know it would, and I tell you, I shall die soon, and set you free.”

This was exactly the state of feeling Edith had intended to excite, but now she hastened to relieve the poor old man from his apprehensions.

“I suppose then, papa, if I could find a husband who would consent to live here

with me during your life, you would be satisfied, and give your consent to the marriage?"

"Ah Edith, no husband would do that. I could not ask it."

"But I could, papa dear, and I have,—and what's more, it is all settled, or will be, when we have your approbation and blessing. I am never to be parted from you, and my husband will be to you an affectionate son. Now guess who it is?"

The Major might possibly have been even more astonished than Margaret at all this; but, as soon as it became clear to him that Edith was not to go away, he received everything else in his usual quiet manner, and entirely as a matter of course. His penetration, however, was at fault—for, in reply to his daughter's last request, he said, with characteristic indifference,

"The baronet, I suppose, my dear, who was looking at you so lovingly last night. I remember now that he paid particular attention to me too."

Edith's face became crimson from the forehead to the chin—and something very like tears shone in her dark, lustrous eyes ; but they came no farther ; and after the pause of a moment, she said calmly enough,

“ Oh, papa ! what a memory you have ! Sir Stuart Bernade was engaged to Miss Egerton long before we knew him. It is Alick Boisragon, your favorite, who is to be my husband.”

“ Well, my dear, you and Margaret know best—but I hope he will recover his health—and then, I daresay, we shall all be very comfortable together.”

“ Of course we shall, papa ; and though Alick is poor now, he will study for the bar some day ; and that will bring us in lots of money.”

The Major smiled a little at this, and told his daughter he would take care they did not starve, whereupon Edith threw herself into his arms and cried for several minutes—but the poor Major, having an instinctive horror of scenes of all kinds,

implored her so piteously to leave off, that she struggled valiantly with her tears, and bade him adieu at last, with a smile upon her lips, though, in her heart, there were yet shadows many and strange.

It is a sad thing for any human being to have griefs and anxieties which they can tell to no one—it is particularly sad for the young, and naturally open-hearted, to be without a friend in their hour of trial or temptation ; a friend to whom they could lay bare every secret feeling, every struggle, and every weakness. It is, I am persuaded, this want, that incites so many to commit their miseries to paper—to write heart-breaking stanzas, or to keep sentimental journals. Now, Edith Lascelles was far too careless, and possessed too little method, to be the owner of a regular journal ; but, in moments of *ennui* or unhappiness, she often scribbled over several sheets of foolscap, interspersing her rambling thoughts with still more rambling sketches—the favourite subject being a nun kneel-

ing before an altar in the act of taking the veil.

In retiring to her own room after the interview with her father, she sat down to write, and the earnestness of the feelings she tried to describe, may be gathered from the fact of there being only one kneeling figure in the whole page ; and that was at the very end, and done more, I imagine, from long habit, than from any distinct consciousness of what she was about. This was what she wrote,

“ I wonder if ever I shall love Alick very much. I really thought it possible when he was thanking me for the happiness I had given him. It is certainly agreeable to be loved as he loves me ; and yet, I think it was the perfect knowledge I had of his devotion from the first, that kept my own heart free. But no, no, no ! why should I try to deceive even this bit of paper—it was nothing of the sort—it was that I had been fool enough—and mad enough, and wicked enough, to covet and

desire another woman's goods. I had stood on tiptoe (mentally) to gaze at the lofty cedar, and I had no relish afterwards for the drooping ash. But things could not go on long as they have been going on lately—and bad as I am, I really could not endure the daily sight of the misery that, I suppose, has been caused by me. Poor, good, patient Annie ! I believe her gentleness and heroism (for had our cases been reversed I am sure I should have scratched her eyes out) have contributed more than anything else to soften and amend my heart. Positively my strongest desire at present is to do what is right, to repair as far as may be, the mischief I have occasioned, though *when* I should have made the fatal plunge, had it not been for the gratifying dialogue I overheard, I dare not pretend to say. And so I am actually engaged at last ! It seems like a puzzling dream instead of a plain matter-of-fact reality, and one that has been brought about by my own free will

alone—of course with a view of increasing my individual happiness. But now comes the question, that little crooked note of interrogation, which always strikes me as being out of its place, and in everybody's way. I don't like being obliged to answer my own questions—it is sufficiently tiresome to answer other people's, but when it comes to one's own, it is really too absurd, and enough to make a saint stamp his foot with rage. Out with it then, since it must be so—*I am not happy*. It seems to me that I have given up the race too soon, that with the possibility of attaining the goal, and drinking deep draughts of the enchanted waters, or, as poor Alick says, of having paradise dwelling in my soul, I have wilfully and stupidly stopped short in the way, and contented myself with—with what? with giving, instead of receiving happiness, the very thing I was crying up to Margaret, and pretending to be so enchanted about—well, well, it is quite clear that I don't know what I want,

or what is good for me—so for once I will be a philosopher, and try to make the best of that which *is*, and cannot be altered. Yes, I really will be very good, and astonish everybody. Above all, I will take care never to stand upon tiptoe again, but always walk on quietly and soberly ; and then I shall become, as the moral lessons say, ‘such a nice, pleasant little girl,’ and everybody will love Edith.”

CHAPTER II.

CONGRATULATIONS.

THERE was certainly this merit in Edith Lascelles ; when she did what she thought a good thing, she did not do it by halves ; and having voluntarily engaged herself to Alick Boisragon, she determined that it should be made public as soon as possible. I have known people adopt this plan when they distrusted their own power of continuing in any difficult path they had entered upon, and in which they sincerely

wished to remain and advance. I think, all things considered, it is a sensible plan, as every human being is necessarily greatly influenced by the opinion of his own little world of watching eyes ; and many who would retreat from weakness, from weariness, or from real instability of purpose, go on, because they know that their every footstep is marked and commented on.

Whether any such feeling as this influenced Edith in immediately announcing her engagement matters little now. She did it in her own very pleasing and graceful manner, and warm wishes and congratulations poured in upon the youthful pair from every quarter.

Mrs. Boisragon, who was, of course, the first to learn the news, received it with deep and singular emotion. She took Edith in her arms, kissed her with all a mother's tenderness, and then added this somewhat uncommon benediction—

“ May you, my dearest girl, be blessed in the measure that you will bless my son,

may your happiness be in proportion to that you will confer on him, may his joy be your joy, his tears by your tears—may you live long together in love, and, at length, die together in peace. Heaven keep you both.”

Poor Edith, who had been quite unprepared for anything so solemn as this, looked very much inclined to cry, but thinking better of it, she embraced Mrs. Boisragon with sincere feeling, and ran to tell Alick that his mother, though a charming person, had given her a fit of the blue devils, which she should be a week getting rid of. And, in the meantime, this really good and right thinking mother was explaining to Major Lascelles, that she should be able, owing to her daughter's marriage with Sir Stuart Bernarde, to allow Alick three hundred a-year, out of her own income ; and as the Major was quite unconscious that this only left two hundred for herself, he received the communication

with a grave though courteous bow, shook hands with the very ladylike and still handsome widow, and expressed a hope that she would often come and look after the young people when they were settled.

The next to whom Edith made known what had happened were the worthy dwellers in Fernley cottage, including Nettia, who had now returned to her aunts ; and *en masse* they arrived at the Manor-house, with faces like the sunbeams that had attended them on their way.

To attempt any account of the stately satisfaction of Miss Cargill, the voluble delight of Miss Eliza, or the less demonstrative but equally earnest congratulations of the excellent Mr. Simeon, would be labour thrown away—these kind creatures were now in the very zenith of their contentment, and believed that no mortal pathway had ever been strewn with so many flowers as were blooming beneath their feet at present.

But Nettia's manner, like her mother's, had something peculiar in it, and on this I must, for a moment, dwell.

In the presence of her aunts and Margaret, she had simply kissed and congratulated her future sister as the rest had done, but taking an opportunity when the conversation was very animated, to draw Edith into another room, she looked at her with a quiet, penetrating gaze, and said, abruptly—

“Edith, will you give me your word of honour that this engagement has been entered upon advisedly—that you believe sincerely it will contribute to your own happiness as well as to Alick's.”

“Oh, my dear Annie,” replied Edith, blushing a little, but squeezing cordially the hand that had been placed in hers, “don't, for pity's sake, impute all sorts of romantic virtues to me, for it only reveals to my tender conscience the entire selfishness of everything that I do. Above all,

let us try to be merry and not lachrymose on this occasion—depend on it, I shall not set you the example of gloom.”

Silenced, if not convinced, Nettia repeated her fervent wishes for the happiness of both parties, and Edith laughed and jested, called her grave companion “sister Anne,” hoped they should become staunch allies for the future, and sketched a pretty picture of the life they would lead when Sir Stuart and Lady Bernarde came to pass the summer at Heather lodge, or at the Manor.

Then, having brought back the smiles to Nettia’s face, she made her return to the rest of the party, amongst whom the *belle fiancée* still kept up her charming spirits, and convinced them all, the devoted lover included, that the world did not contain a happier or more light-hearted being than herself.

This was the day after she had promised her hand to Alick Boisragon.

Last of all, came, with his congratulations, the proud Scotchman of Heather Lodge ; and it happened that Edith had to receive these alone.

It was on the third morning succeeding the engagement, and Alick had felt well enough to take a drive in the pony chaise with Margaret, who, being a more experienced whip than her sister, had been entreated by Mrs. Boisragon to act as charioteer on the occasion. Of course the lover was not once consulted in the matter, or he would have chosen Edith for his companion, even if he had been certain that she would have driven him to the abode of a person who shall be nameless—such at least is the noble disinterestedness and courage of lovers in general, and I am quite sure that what any lover breathing would have done for the sake of his Dulcinea, Alick Boisragon would have done for Edith in a tenfold degree.

But, as I said just now, this little matter was all arranged without his knowledge,

and when Margaret, ready dressed and holding her white driving gloves in her hand, stood before him, he could not of course be ungallant enough to propose a change. So they set forth under a bright May sun and a sweet west wind, and Mrs. Boisragon and Edith stood on the steps watching the pony carriage till it was out of sight.

“And now,” said the mother, turning fondly to her little smiling companion, “what is my Edith going to do with herself all the morning? Shall we stroll together on the lawn for half an hour? this sunshine and warm breeze are deliciously tempting.’

“So they are *madre mia*,” replied Edith, clasping and fondling the hand that Mrs. Boisragon had placed on her shoulder while speaking, “but I have really and truly got a song that I must practise a little bit this morning, as I am to sing it to Alick to-night. So as my industrious inclinations are not to be relied on, I think

I will do this first, and then join you on the lawn."

"Very well, my love, only do come to me when you can. My heart has expanded lately, Edith, to admit a new tenant, and every hour she contrives to nestle closer and closer in the place that has opened to receive her."

"You are too good to me, *madre mia*," said Edith, again kissing the hand that seemed so reluctant to release her own. "If you spoil me in this way how shall I learn to live without you?"

"You will have some one who will spoil you a thousand times more, my pretty one," replied Mrs. Boisragon, looking lovingly and smilingly at her future daughter, "but run away now, Edith, and then you will be able to join me the sooner."

On this occasion Edith had told only the simple truth--she did want to practise a new song, and not to escape a *tête-à-tête* with Alick's mother, of whom she was really

beginning to be excessively fond. But her industrious inclinations were destined to be nipped in the bud, for scarcely had she gone twice over her lesson, when a servant abruptly threw open the door of the drawing-room, and announced "Sir Stuart Bernarde."

It would be difficult to say which of the two looked the most uncomfortable and embarrassed at the sudden meeting—the lady was certainly the first to recover herself, and advancing with a quicker step than usual, she held out her hand frankly and bade him welcome in her accustomed manner.

And what did he do ?

Why he took the hand that was offered to him, but instead of squeezing it, and making a fine speech, he only, in his own grave and dignified way, led Edith back the piano, and begged her to sing to him the song she had sung on the evening of their last meeting. And without a word of enquiry on her part, or of explanation

on his, this request was instantly complied with, and "Love not," once more echoed sweetly and thrillingly through the lofty room.

At its conclusion the young songstress again rose from her seat and approached her somewhat eccentric guest, who had stood gazing out of the window all the time she was singing.

"Well, Sir Stuart, am I not even to be thanked for my exertions in your favour? Do you reckon a song like that, and a voice like mine—nothing?"

At this address, which was spoken in Edith's most playful, winning way, Sir Stuart turned round to her abruptly—And what an aspect was that which greeted her!

It was not altogether grief, nor anger, nor disdain, but it was a mingling of these three, united with something of a better, nobler kind. It was as if he had been warring with his own passions, the fiery passions of a naturally lofty nature, and as

if the result had been pity for himself, and pity approaching to contempt for her. Whatever else he might have felt, Edith's light and playful tone, seemed to have converted it all into this sublime disdain—this magnanimous indulgence for her woman's weakness and littleness. It was as if he said, pluming himself on his own superiority the while :

“Woman is the lesser man, and all thỳ passions
 matched with mine
Are as moonlight unto sunlight or as water unto
 wine.”

This was only what his looks said, for his words, when he did speak, were as unlike anything of the sort as possible. They were these :—

“I am infinitely obliged to you, Miss Lascelles, for the song. I came to congratulate my cousin on his happy prospects—Allow me to say to you also, that though I am probably the last to wish you joy on

the occasion of your engagement, my wishes are as fervent and sincere as those of any who have been before me."

It was for Edith now to lose courage and to grow pale—but Sir Stuart was strong and generous to the last. He turned away resolutely from the sight of those quivering lips and tearful eyes; and suddenly taking up his hat he pleaded an engagement with Nettia, and expressing his intention of coming again in the evening when Alick would be at home, said a kind, friendly adieu, and left the house, believing the last struggle was over, the final victory achieved.

CHAPTER III.

COURTSHIP.

FROM this time everything seemed to go on smoothly and pleasantly enough at the Manor-house. Edith became every day more reconciled to her chosen destiny, more satisfied with herself, and consequently more charming and agreeable to all around her. Alick was transcendently happy, and it was scarcely possible to witness his deep contentment, his constant gladness of heart, without, in some degree sharing

it. His mother looked at him and thanked Heaven for its rich mercies, while she learned to love Edith with a love that had in it all a mother's clinging and enduring tenderness. I believe that Nettia herself, with her life-long goodness and devotion, was not more dear and precious to the heart of her mother than was this stranger of a few weeks, who, almost without an effort, had played the part of an enchantress and appropriated to herself priceless treasures of affection.

For Edith, it was certainly a happy time—everybody seemed in league to add to her pleasures, to increase her joys, and cold indeed must have been her heart had it remained insensible to all this genuine and earnest devotion. Sir Stuart Bernarde was not a frequent visitor at present ; he had bought a beautiful quiet horse for Nettia, and was busily engaged in giving her riding lessons, so neither of these two saw much of what was going on at the Manor, and we must hope that they also

were wandering in their own paradise of love.

Alick, although his progress towards recovery was now quite wonderful, did not yet feel equal to join the family, at dinner, at least he said so, but I think it more likely that he did not choose to give up the pleasure to which he had grown accustomed, of seeing Edith come in every evening with her two plates of delicious fruit, and of having her all to himself while the others lingered over their dessert in the dining-room.

They both, I believe, enjoyed this quiet evening hour, when the soft breeze would enter through the open window, laden with the sweet perfumes of spring, and when they could watch together the brilliant sunsets, and listen to the low carols of the birds, and the insects' pleasant humming, that seemed to speak of sunshine, summer, and repose. In all these things they felt alike, and trivial as they were in themselves, their effect was to draw closer to-

gether the hearts that appeared destined, both by nature and circumstance, to be united for ever.

Generally on these occasions there was little conversation between the lovers (as they are now entitled to be called) Alick being content to lean back on his couch or easy chair, holding his companion's hand, and gazing at her with fond and foolish idolatry, while Edith, to whom this homage of the heart was very sweet and soothing, would sit eating her strawberries with the disengaged hand, now and then offering a very tempting one to Alick, and dreaming idly.

But sometimes they happened to be in a talkative mood, or rather the lady happened to be thus disposed, for her lover followed her lightest wish in all things, and then there was no subject too wild, too extravagant, or too speculative for their discussion. To Alick, as her future husband, Edith spoke freely and openly about her mother, and he, with his mingling of romance and

chivalry and freshness of mind, encouraged her to hope that this mysterious parent would yet come forth some day, make her tarnished fame clear as the noon, and prove worthy of all the imaginative tenderness Edith had so long hoarded up for her in her secret heart. Whether or not his arguments on this subject were convincing to his listener he could not decide, but he saw that they pleased Edith, who frequently would say to him, if he shewed any disposition to change the topic,

“Oh, go on about mama, dear Alick—your picture of her interests and amuses me.”

It was often quite a touching and pleasing sight when Mrs. Boisragon joined her children (as she always called them both) in their pleasant little room, and when placing herself between them, she would throw an arm round each, and *look* the blessings her full heart would not enable her to speak, while Edith, leaning her pretty head on that kind, maternal bosom,

would murmur gently and caressingly—
“*Madre, madre mia.*”

If Nettia had been of a jealous nature or anything less humble-minded than she was, there can be no doubt that she would have felt very uncomfortable at her mother's daily increasing attachment to Edith—that same Edith who had so nearly taken from her the love she prized above all. But if such feelings arose for a moment in her heart she gave them no encouragement, and none could believe that beneath that serene exterior there went on even the common struggles of weak humanity—“so calm and still and cold,” as Edith had once said, was the outward deportment of Antoinette Egerton.

But pleasant as it is to me to record these quiet, happy days, I must not dwell upon them too long, for even while I write the shadow, from those that succeeded, falls upon my heart, and urges me to hasten onward in my task.

The month of June was well nigh over,

when one evening, Edith entered her lover's room carrying their dessert, and on her own plate an unopened letter that had just arrived.

"There Alick," she said, sitting down in her usual place, "I have picked you out the best fruit on the table, but you must feed yourself to-day, because I have got a letter to read, and if you are very good I may perhaps let you hear part of it."

"Who is it from?" asked Alick, rather anxiously, for he was not aware that his lady love had any correspondents, and he was far from pleased (to tell the truth) at the thought of having his own peculiar hour encroached upon by letter reading.

"Oh! only one of the Armstrongs!" replied Edith, as she glanced rapidly over the closely written pages; full of nonsense of course—humph! cousin Joseph is broken-hearted at the news of my engagement; mama Armstrong thinks I have not acted quite—what?—quite fairly by him!

Pooh ; nonsense, mama Armstrong wants common sense !”

And with an impatient exclamation, probably intended to cover a rather guilty blush, Edith threw down the only half-read letter, and began eating her fruit very fast indeed.

Alick looked uneasy.

“ Pray finish your friend’s interesting communication,” he said at last, “ or are there any secrets in it, besides the despair of cousin Joseph ?”

“ Secrets, nonsense ! I never had a secret in my life ; but can you conceive such idiotic folly as imputing my civilities to that poor, stupid boy, to any tender feeling ? But really, those Armstrongs are all half mad !”

“ I never thought you a flirt, Edith,” said Alick, thoughtfully ; “ will you tell me candidly whether you did deserve the appellation.”

“ Upon my word, sir, you are not much troubled with scruples,” replied the young

lady with suddenly flashing eyes “by what right do you put these absurd questions to me?”

“Oh Edith,” exclaimed Alick, deeply, seriously wounded by her tone and look, “I would not for the world offend you. If my love gives me no right to ask you a simple question concerning the past, then indeed I can claim no other—I withdraw the enquiry now and I entreat you to forgive me.”

Could anything be more injudicious, more destructive to his own influence and power over Edith than this? It was strange that both brother and sister, so dissimilar in other respects, should possess alike this inordinate humility in the presence of the objects of their affection. It might certainly soften and interest the proud, homage loving heart for the moment, but its ultimate tendency was assuredly, in both these cases, to inspire less respect, and consequently to loosen the bands of love.

It is my firm conviction that a woman is always wrong in depreciating herself to her lover or husband—let her in action, in practice, be as meek and humble as she likes, as it becometh a christian woman at all times to be—but let her avoid constantly telling the man that she is his inferior, that she is unworthy of his affection ; or depend upon it he will come at last to believe and treat her accordingly.

To men in general I should not think it necessary to offer the same advice. In the first place they certainly are not addicted to the habit of depreciating themselves, and in the next place, it is so natural for a woman to feel the superiority of a man she has accepted, that it would be scarcely likely to produce the same result as in the reversed case. One of the exceptions however to this rule was Alick Boisragon, to whom we must now return.

“ Oh I am not really angry, you silly thing,” said Edith, in reply to his humble petition for pardon, “ only I do detest all

that cant about flirting and such like—supposing I did flirt a little for my own amusement, in days gone by—is that to be considered as a capital crime?”

“Dearest Edith, I will never speak of it again. I have the fullest confidence in you now.”

And so the matter dropped.

But it would have been infinitely better if Alick had told Edith what was indeed the sober truth, that this discovery in the beloved object, of a weakness he particularly disliked, although it could not shake his doting fondness for her, had filled his own heart with a foreboding sadness—had cast the first cloud over his almost too great and radiant happiness.

Edith, whose powers of observation, as you have seen before, were remarkably acute, soon found out that something was wrong, and feeling herself to blame, she re-doubled her efforts to smile away her companion's gloom, and, at length, by her tender and affectionate playfulness, as-

sisted by one of his favourite songs, she succeeded in bringing back his smiles, and he, with all a lover's penetration, availed himself of this soft and relenting mood to press Edith to name their marriage day. In the midst of the animated discussion that this request occasioned, Mrs. Boisragon came in from the dining-room.

"Well, my children," she said, seating herself, as usual, between them, "what weighty matter is it that occupies those two wise young heads at present? nothing less than the fate of nations can have brought that brilliant colour to my Edith's cheek, or that eager look to my own Alick's eye."

"Dearest mother, plead with me, and for me," cried Alick, impetuously—"say I have been patient long enough—that any further delay would be the height of cruelty—tell her *you* wish the marriage concluded—and then, perhaps, her unreasonable obstinacy will give way. Edith

will refuse nothing to you, mother, while she will grant less than nothing to me !”

Mrs. Boisragon, as you may guess, took part with her well-beloved son on this occasion, although it was against her darling Edith, whose obstinacy did give way at last, under their double attack, or rather, (as Alick had said) she had not the heart to refuse any request of Mrs. Boisragon’s : so, after listening, for a considerable time, to all their tender pleadings, she laid a hand on the mouth of each, and enjoined silence, while she spoke herself.

“ You have conquered, *madre mia*. To you, and you alone, the victory belongs. Now hear my unalterable decision. To-day is the twenty third of June. In one week from this time, I command Alick’s absence. You know that change of air has been prescribed for him—he can go whithersoever he pleases—despotic as I am, I leave him unlimited freedom of choice in this matter. On the first of August he may

return, and on the second we will be married. See, I am not too hard, *madre mia*, so now kiss me, and give my conduct all the praise it deserves."

Mrs. Boisragon approved entirely of this arrangement, and declared her determination of accompanying Alick into Devonshire herself ; but Edith made her promise faithfully to return for the wedding ; and this settled, they began, as women will do, entering into all the little details of their plans, without noticing that poor Alick was infinitely less enchanted with the prospect than themselves. He did not, in fact, like the idea of even this temporary separation—he could see no necessity in the world for such a measure ; but knowing that they neither of them intended to consult him, he wisely said nothing about the matter, but listened, with as good a grace as he could command, to their essentially female gossip.

In a short time, Margaret, having read the major to sleep, joined the social little

group, and was made acquainted with the subject of their discussion. She looked, for one moment, anxiously at her sister, but Edith's unruffled brow and smiling face forbade any pressing fears on her account, so Margaret, though slightly agitated, spoke kindly affectionate words to the future bride and bridegroom, and then went to the tea-table, and tried to reason herself into the gladness which she knew ought to be felt on such an occasion.

"Surely," exclaimed Edith, suddenly, during a momentary pause in the conversation "that was the hall bell that rang just now. I hope it may be some of the dear people from the cottage. We scarcely ever see them now."

The words were barely uttered, when the door of their little sanctum was gently opened, and Miss Egerton, in riding costume, followed by Sir Stuart Bernarde, entered, and warmly greeted the assembled group.

"We are come to beg a cup of tea," said Sir Stuart, addressing Margaret, while

Nettia was monopolized by her mother and brother. "Annie has done such wonders in the riding way this evening, that I expect she is half dead, although she boasts of not even feeling tired."

"We are so delighted to see you," replied Margaret, making room for the baronet beside herself. "Edith was just remarking, that all our friends had deserted us of late."

Sir Stuart and Edith both looked up at these words, and their eyes met, but no emotion was apparent beyond a slight and scarcely perceptible flush on the cheek of the lady, and a still slighter wrinkle on the broad forehead of the gentleman, both of which symptoms of embarrassment disappeared almost instantaneously; and then the conversation became general and animated, and Margaret's excellent tea went gaily round.

"By the bye, I *have* a bit of news for you," Sir Stuart exclaimed, in reply to

somebody's observation respecting the scarcity of that article at Fernley. "I am threatened with a visit from Monsieur Eugène de la Tour, who is consumed with *ennui* and want of excitement. This ought to be very interesting to the ladies, at least, of whom the young foreigner professes himself to be an adorer. Mrs. Boisragon, I believe, you have the honour of the gentleman's acquaintance?"

"Yes, indeed," was the smiling reply; "but I should never have suspected you, Sir Stuart, of having admitted Monsieur Eugène to that degree of intimacy which authorises one person to invite himself to the house of another."

"My dearest Mrs. Boisragon," said Edith, who was visibly annoyed at the intelligence just made public, "your observation proves beyond all dispute that you have *not* the honour of the gentleman's acquaintance, or you would have known that there are no bounds to the self-assur-

ance, the impertinence, and the effrontery of that most detestable and conceited little animal."

Of course, this speech directed all eyes towards the speaker, and Mrs. Boisragon said to her, in an under tone, half seriously and half in jest. "You should avoid, my dear, using such strong language in condemnation of any of your male acquaintances, because people are apt to attribute it to pique and wounded vanity."

Had it not been Alick's mother, the privileged one, *la madre mia*, who gave this slight rebuke, Edith would no doubt have resented it with her usual haughtiness; but, as it was, she only coloured a little, and pleaded guilty to the weakness of imbibing strong prejudices. Alick had looked surprised and discomfited also by her sudden outbreak against the Frenchman, but Edith paid no attention to him just now, and other topics of conversation were soon introduced.

Sir Stuart and Miss Egerton took their departure before it grew dark ; but it was arranged, that, during the ensuing week, they should all meet oftener than they had lately done.

CHAPTER IV.

A FAREWELL PARTY.

THAT week flew by rapidly, and the last evening of Mrs. Boisragon's and Alick's stay at the Manor arrived. Nettia, too, at the eleventh hour, had made up her mind to return home with them, on the plea of having various preparations to complete for her own marriage, which had, at length, been definitely fixed for the month of September. Sir Stuart would have gone also, but that he had already

written to express his willingness to receive Monsieur Eugène de la Tour before the idea occurred to him.

They were all to meet this last evening at Fernley Cottage, and eat strawberries and cream in the orchard, as Nettia had once before suggested. Even Major Lascelles was persuaded to join the party, and Margaret and himself set out in the pony-chaise, while Edith, Alick, and Mrs. Boisragon preferred walking slowly through the lanes.

It had been intensely hot during the day, but a cool breeze had now sprung up, and the evening was soft, serene and delicious. The mother and son were both, however, too depressed in spirits to enjoy the sweetness of the scene and hour, and although Edith (who was more than usually animated and gay) did her very best to cheer and enliven them, her efforts met with but little success, and the conversation as they strolled along, was often languid and disjointed.

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At last Mrs. Boisragon, apparently displeased at her own weakness, turned and said, with a sad smile to Edith—

“ My dearest girl, you must forgive our bad spirits to-night, since they are certainly complimentary to yourself. I can well understand my poor Alick’s feelings, though I ought to assist him in conquering them, instead of setting him such a wretched example. Assuredly it is the height of weakness to grieve so unreasonably over the prospect of a month’s separation—but I candidly confess that partings of all kinds are to me the great trials of life. I am but a poor, silly, old woman, you see, and not in the least fit to guide and support that foolish, love-sick boy.”

Edith, who was quite affected at the really touching manner in which this was said, stopped to kiss and thank the affectionate speaker ; and then with an equally tender and earnest look, she turned to Alick, and chided him gently for his gloom and silence.

“ Dear Edith ;” he replied, very seriously, and in a low, mournful voice, “ if you loved only half as deeply as I do, you too would have no heart for gaiety on this occasion—I was reading a few lines yesterday that struck me as strangely applicable to my present feelings, though I could not have described them thus myself—My mother, at least, will enter into the spirit of the poet if *you* cannot, Edith ; so I will repeat the verse —

“ ‘ I know not how it is
But a foreboding presses on my heart at times, until
I sicken.
I have heard, and from men learned, that before the
touch,
The common, coarser touch of good or ill—that
oftentimes
A subtle sense informs some spirits of the approach
Of things to be—’ ”

“ Oh, you are so romantic and fanciful,

dear Alick," said Edith ; but Mrs. Boisragon, though she sighed, made no remark, and Alick saw that he was understood by one of his companions, though not, alas ! by the one from whom sympathy would have been the most precious.

"What is it you think or fear?" asked Edith, soon discovering that her lover's thoughts were not to be drawn from the subject of their approaching separation. "Have you any vision of my sinking into an early grave, or eloping with Mr. Simeon Cargill, or taking vows of eternal spinster-ship, or what ? for truly I can discover no grounds on which to build an edifice of inquietude and alarm."

"Ah, Edith, when our whole heart and soul are garnered up in one object, we tremble at every breath of air that passes over it. I cannot jest as you do, for my love is no light matter, Edith. Hitherto it has been life, joy, heaven, to me ; but I feel that away from you, it will be torture, madness, hell itself—I shall have no peace,

no rest, my fears will be confined to no particular spot, they will be spread abroad over the whole universe, they will fill all space. Listen, Edith, I try to be reasonable but I cannot ; it seems to me that not only my outward and visible life is bound up in your love, but my spiritual and eternal existence—It seems to me that were I to lose you, thick, impenetrable gloom, everlasting darkness would be the result. I know you do not, you cannot love in this way ; I think sometimes my adoration for you has madness in it ; but whether it is reason or insanity I tremble at its fearful power. What an instrument it might become in the hands of Satan for my destruction ; what a weapon in the hands of Heaven to punish my idolatry.”

Mrs. Boisragon had for sometime lingered behind, out of kindness to the lovers ; and it was Edith alone who heard and replied to this wild and impassioned speech.

“Alick,” she said, “you positively frighten me, quite take away my breath,

by your impetuosity. I am far from wishing to quarrel with the extent of your love, but I shall indeed be seriously angry with your foolish fears."

"Edith, one is inseparable from the other ; your song is haunting me to-night—

'Love not, love not, the thing you love may die.'

Then I look at your blooming cheek, your youthful form, your light and vigorous step, and another warning comes—

'Love not, love not, the thing you love may change.'

And then my very soul sinks within me, and the shadows creep on faster and faster, and I could almost pray to die at once with your arms around me, your

heart beating warm and true against my own."

The tears were now gathering in Edith's eyes, and her spirits were becoming infected. She stooped and gathered a daisy that was blooming in their path.

"Here, Alick, you foolish thing, take this as a pledge of my constancy. It is a plain, unsentimental flower, but I fancy I have somewhere read a very pretty sonnet about its welcoming every changing hour, and weathering every sky—doing in short what no other flower *can* do. Consider this daisy, Alick, an emblem of my love, and do let me see you smile and look happy this last evening. Ah, thank goodness, we are nearly at the end of our walk, for you have made me as nervous and silly as yourself. Come, *madre mia*," turning round and slightly raising her voice, "don't, for pity's sake, leave us any longer to ourselves, or we shall rush into our good aunts' parlour, in a state of dismal lunacy."

Mrs. Boisragon immediately obeyed the summons, and in a few minutes more they all entered the cottage, where the happy, cheerful faces that greeted them (not to mention the pretty, flower-decked tea-table, and the bright, hissing urn) certainly had great influence in banishing all outward gloom ; and if any heart remained still uncheered, it must have been a stubborn one, and little deserving of compassion.

The Miss Cargills were very precise and particular in small things, and they took care that both the engaged gentlemen should be placed next to their respective ladies, and Mr. Simeon, (who was made very happy by having a seat near Mrs. Boisragon,) indulged in sundry little jokes and inuendos aimed at the double pair, which were received with delighted smiles by his sisters, and kind toleration from the rest of the party, although there was one amongst them—Sir Stuart Bernarde—who

evidently suffered from the infliction, and wished the facetious old gentleman anywhere but in his own parlour.

But in spite of his dissatisfaction the social meal passed off merrily, and Nettia, accompanied by Edith, went to arrange the tables for the orchard banquet, after which the latter was to sing, and then the Manor party were to walk home by moonlight.

"Annie," said Edith, when they were alone, "you must really look well after that wilful brother of yours. He is groaning with a thousand ridiculous fears and fancies now, and he declares he shall be infinitely worse when he is away."

"I do not doubt it," replied the sister, "poor Alick's feelings are never in moderation; and he will be in torment till you actually belong to him. However, I promise, dear Edith, to cheer him as well as I can, and—and I suppose," (with a faint, odd smile) "I ought to ask you to look a little after Stuart."

“Oh! the cases are widely different,” said Edith, quickly, and ingeniously upsetting a small jug of cream. “Sir Stuart Bernarde is not my brother, nor is he, I should imagine, of a restless, jealous, fearful nature like Alick—”

“No,” was the quiet answer, “I do not think he is—but now will you summon our friends, Edith, while I fetch another jug of cream to replace the one you threw down.”

It was a really glorious night. The moon rose early, and shone through the orchard trees with calm and steady brightness, upon the party who sat there in such pleasant, social friendliness, glancing back into the past, or visioning the yet unseen future, as each, by turns, endeavoured to contribute his mite to the general entertainment. Alick's spirits had risen, by degrees, under the influence of quiet, cheerful society, and now, with Edith by

his side, and kind, smiling faces around him, he too smiled and talked, and looked almost happy again.

But it was getting late, the evening dewes were falling, and there came an unanimous petition for Edith's promised song.

I believe that all professed singers, really good musicians, think little or nothing of the words they utter while singing—with them the air, the melody is everything, and they would be as well content to warble a nursery rhyme, wedded to beautiful music, as the most touching love ballad that was ever penned.

Such, at least, I have often heard asserted by first-rate singers, and on no other principle than this can I account for Edith's *mal apropos* selection on the present occasion. Her audience had named no particular song—they had only stipulated that it should be an English one; and just saying that it was an old air she had lately stumbled upon, she commenced

with more than her usual melancholy sweetness—

“ We shall not meet again, love, as once we have met.”

It matters not how the song went on ; the words were very earnest and affecting, and the burden was ever the same, “ We shall not meet again, love, &c., &c.” The audience were all struck by the apparent singularity of Edith’s choosing such a song on such an occasion, and Mrs. Boisragon trembled for the effect it might produce on Alick’s sensitive and nervous mind. It seemed too that as the singer proceeded she became herself conscious of the sentiment to which she was giving such exquisite and thrilling expression, for once or twice her voice trembled perceptibly, and she appeared on the point of stopping abruptly—but the deep and eager atten-

tion of her listeners probably gave her a kind of momentary enthusiasm, and the ballad was concluded at last amidst the suppressed sobs of all the females of the party.

Alick did not speak a word, and when his mother leant forward to look into his face she saw with terror that it was white, as rigid as stone, though he had neither fainted nor was going to faint. Only the dim shadows from the future were pressing upon him with a force his reason had grown too feeble to oppose, and the heart that no physical dangers could appal, was quivering with agony at the undefined dangers with which a far too active imagination had surrounded the object of his really inordinate love.

But the paroxysm passed away unobserved but by the ever observant mother ; and by the time the party separated, Alick had regained his usual composure, and Edith's increased efforts to enliven him as

they walked home, seconded now by those of Mrs. Boisragon, were apparently much more successful than they had been in the former part of the evening. No allusion was made by either of them to the unfortunate song ; and when they said good night at length, it was with an heroic calmness that gave little token of what had been, and, perhaps, still were, the sufferings of one of them.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT TAKES PLACE AT FERNLEY.

EDITH followed Mrs. Boisragon into her room—as she was often in the habit of doing, and sitting down with an air of fatigue or dejection, she asked if she might stay and talk a little while.

“Certainly, my love,” was the reply, “if you are not too sleepy. For my own part, I feel that it will be impossible for me to rest to-night.”

“Then I will not leave you, *madre mia* :

said Edith, throwing her arms round Mrs. Boisragon's neck, and kissing again and again the cheek that was now so pale with anxiety. "Do you know," she continued, "I am quite angry with myself for having insisted upon this temporary separation. Poor, dear Alick, I could not have imagined he would feel it as it does—it makes me miserable to see him—and you too, *madre mia*, so depressed."

"My dear girl," replied the mother, "I believe it is better as it has been arranged; my heart bleeds for Alick's evident sufferings, and something unusually heavy lays on my own spirits too—but for him, for your future husband, Edith, I think this little trial is necessary. His mind wants strengthening. He *must* learn that life is not composed of one passion; he must be made to understand that existence was given for other purposes than to be breathed out in sighs at a woman's feet. He must learn, too, to *trust* as well as to love you, Edith, or

there will be little happiness for either of you. Hitherto, we have all, I fancy, looked only on the bright side of this intended marriage; but, my child, we must not shut our eyes to the shadows of the picture—for shadows there are, and I feel it my duty to point out some of them to your observation. Alick's nature is an uncommon one, easily excited to the wildest joyousness, more easily depressed to the deepest gloom. He will never, I fear, have sufficient energy to take an active interest in the small things of life. The power of concentration is quite a remarkable one in his organisation, and I have always looked forward with a sort of dread to the time when his heart should awake and call passion into existence. That time has now arrived, and much as I have desired for him an early marriage, a settled home for his ardent affections, I could almost wish, dearest, that he had not met a creature so fascinating, so irresistible, so dangerously bewitching as your

little self, Edith. I speak, you see, on the supposition that your head is strong enough to bear an old woman's flattery—but you don't believe it *is* flattery, and you are right ; from me, at least, it is truth, and my firm conviction is that in your marriage with my son, these rare gifts of nature will prove, if not a misfortune, at least a constant occasion of watchfulness on your part. I do not know that he will be jealous, in the ordinary meaning of the word ; but he will be like a miser with a rich treasure of gold, which he is in hourly fear of having taken from him—*du reste*, he will worship you as woman was never worshipped before ; and if you use your influence well, I believe you may mould him in time to anything you please."

"I hope to make him happy, *mia madre*," Edith said only, in reply to this rather long explanation of her future husband's disposition.

"While you continue to love him, that

will not be difficult, Edith. And now, one more word before I send you from me. You *must* know, dearest, that I have the highest opinion of you, that my confidence in your firmness of mind, and singleness of heart, is unbounded—but Edith, to the wisest, the holiest, and the best, temptations will occasionally arise, and temptations that require, may be, more than mortal power to resist. I speak to you as I should to my own daughter—do I not love you as one? and I would remind you, Edith, that there is just a possibility that temptation may assail you in the shape of a rival to my son. It is not likely, you will say, during the short time of his absence, and I admit that it is not; but such things have been, and, therefore, they may be again. In such a case, my child, remember, there is One who heareth prayer, One who hath said—‘*My strength is sufficient for thee!*’ and need I say, remember, also, that in your fidelity the life of my Alick is bound up, and in his life,

mine. Forgive me, my own Edith, for I have made you weep, and you shall stay with the croaking old woman no longer—nay, but I will be obeyed; so Heaven's blessings be upon you, dearest, and His angels guard your rest. Good night, good night."

For a few minutes, Edith sobbed passionately on the bosom of her tender friend. Then she raised her flushed face for the last kiss, and murmuring, in her soft, but earnest voice—

"You may trust me, *mia madre*," went slowly and reluctantly to her own (for that night) sleepless bed.

The next morning, Alick appeared in better spirits than any of the rest, and though, when the actual moment of parting came, his sudden paleness terrified all who witnessed it, there was no other symptom of extraordinary emotion, and his last words to Edith (who showed very little courage now) were full of hope and

of the bright prospects opening before them.

“I have got your daisy as a pledge and promise of *your* fidelity,” he had said, as they stood apart from the others ; “but you, my Edith, have asked no pledge, no promise from me. Will you accept this ring, and wear it till I replace it by a more sacred one ? Let it convey to your mind the impression that in the sight of Heaven we are already united, that no power of this earth, nothing but death itself, ought, or can, separate us now.”

And Edith, trembling very much, and thinking, in her secret heart, that both mother and son would eventually be the death of her with their earnestness and solemnity, suffered the young lover to place the ring on her marriage finger, and then to fold her in his arms, with a passionate impetuosity, that seemed more suited to a separation of years than to one of a few weeks.

Scarcely less tender and affecting was the farewell of Mrs. Boisragon to her future daughter ; and when it was all over, and the old Manor house had returned to its original quiet and monotony, Edith shut herself in her own room, and spent the whole day in fits of nervous weeping that she was puzzled to account for herself.

* * * * *

“ Margaret, what can I do to pass away the time ? these summer days are so insupportably long and tedious—I am quite sure I shall die, if you don’t suggest some amusement to me.”

It was thus that Edith addressed her sister, on the second afternoon succeeding the departure of her friends.

“I will walk with you, if you please,” replied Margaret, who was, as you know, the most unselfish creature breathing. “It is very natural, dear, that you should miss Alick and his mother, just at first ; but I hope soon you will return with pleasure to your former occupations.”

“And pray what were my former occupations, Margey ?—Ah, I knew I should puzzle you there, so as you cannot tell *me*, I will tell *you* what they were—just beginning everything, and finishing nothing, while I dreamt, and imagined, and speculated, on my future destiny, with never wearying interest. Now this destiny is decided, and I ask you again what I am to do ? how and where am I to find amusement ?”

Margaret could scarcely forbear smiling at the absurdity of her sister's dilemma, though she felt that it was too true a picture of Edith's mind to be at all a laughing matter. Presently she said,

“I should have thought, dear, that if

you were perfectly satisfied with this destiny, you would feel a kind of mental repose, infinitely preferable to the previous uncertainty ; and when the mind is at rest, any simple, innocent occupation may afford amusement."

" Oh Margey, how you do talk. It is just this mental repose that I complain of. I hate it—I want something to keep the wheels of life in motion—I can't endure that everything should be settled—fixed—unalterable—at least, I suppose that's it ; but, at all events, I want excitement desperately now, and it's quite clear that I can't have it."

" But how, dearest Edith, do you look forward then to the future—to your married life ? In what way will you amuse yourself when everything will be even more settled, fixed, and unalterable, than it is at present ?"

" Oh, I shall have my husband to think about—his love will be a constant source of interest to me —something to keep alive

—to try to increase. Besides, do you make no account of the continual pleasure it will be to form the entire happiness of another, to feel that life, health, sunshine, all that the heart of man delights in, will be enjoyed through me, and me alone.”

“My dear Edith, I am far from thinking lightly of this power of conferring happiness—it is one of Heaven’s most precious gifts to man ; but those who possess it in an eminent degree, have a heavy responsibility, and to me it has always appeared as one of those blessings in which we should rejoice with trembling.”

Edith remained thoughtful for a moment, then she said,

“Don’t let us get upon solemn subjects to-day, Margey, because I’m really dull, and out of sorts. You know, for the future, I’m going to be almost as good and reasonable as yourself—for I do love Alick, and I *will* make him happy when once we are man and wife ; but have pity on me

to-day, Margey, and tell me what I can do?"

And the good, warm-hearted sister, with more tenderness than judgment, left all her own occupations to walk with this wayward being, who, even out of doors, surrounded with the beauties of nature, complained of listlessness and *ennui*, and tried Margaret's patience severely by her vain and useless lamentations.

So it went on, too, from day to day, for Edith's was not a mind that could occupy itself with the details of wedding preparations, and though she would not for worlds have been dressed otherwise than tastefully and becomingly, she could not bring herself to feel the interest, which so many girls and women do, in the fashioning and making up of the articles she was to put on. All these things, therefore, poor Margaret—the daughter of unnumbered duties as she might well be called—was obliged to superintend, and whenever she went to consult the bride elect in any

of these matters, and to entreat her, for her own sake, to become a little more awake to the prose of daily life, Edith would raise her head languidly, as if even that were a trouble all too vast, and repeat in a voice that corresponded perfectly with the look—

“I’m dull, Margey—I’m dull.”

But there came, at length, a day when this dulness was destined to be interrupted, and in a manner that Edith, in spite of her weariness, did not exactly approve.

One bright sunny morning, when the sisters were sitting together, chatting over the letters that had just arrived from Devonshire, they were startled suddenly by the loud ringing of the hall bell—the sound of which had become, within the last week, quite strange to their ears.

“Oh, that is doubtless Sir Stuart Bernarde,” said Margaret. “If you like, Edith dear, we will ask him to come in to tea to-night. It will be a little variety for you.”

“Oh yes, anybody will be welcome,” was the eager reply, and it was scarcely uttered when the opening of the door revealed to their certainly unprepared vision, the diminutive and unprepossessing form of Monsieur Eugène de la Tour.

Of course Margaret's reception was as polite a one as she would have given to any guest, in whom she felt no particular interest ; but Edith spoke to him coldly and ceremoniously, and her looks were like ice itself. Monsieur Eugène, however, was not a person to be easily daunted by a woman's aspect, and he soon showed that he came with a determination to please and to be pleased. After conversing, for some time, on the ordinary topics of the day, and detailing a considerable quantity of London gossip for the entertainment of the ladies, he turned abruptly to Edith, and congratulated her, in a low voice, on her approaching marriage. An ungracious inclination of the head was all he got for this, and then, in a still lower and more

confidential tone, he ventured to hope that she was happy in her new prospects—and that he might be permitted to attend as a humble spectator at the interesting event, and wish her joy in person when it was all over.

“Really, Monsieur de la Tour,” replied Edith, (who could, you know, be excessively rude when she liked), “it is not to me that you must address such a request. I am quite ignorant of the regulations in churches on the occasion of a wedding ; but I presume, by making friends with the sexton or pew-opener, you could get admitted to witness the ceremony.”

The gentleman smiled so blandly at this reply, that Margaret, who had, at first, been quite shocked and startled at her sister’s impertinence, thought now that it must have been said in jest ; but believing it so well to change the subject, she suddenly asked the young Frenchman if he would come and take his tea with them that evening. His delighted acceptance of this in-

vation had been delivered, before Margaret noticed Edith's flush of annoyance and disapproval, and while she was puzzling herself to account for it, the latter spoke—

“And do pray, Monsieur de la Tour, ask your host to accompany you ; for I'm sure you will find two ladies more than you can manage to amuse alone.”

Answering that he would convey the message of invitation to Sir Stuart Bernarde, the young man now rose to take leave ; and with as many capers as he could manage to compress within the short space of ground between his seat and the door, he finally bowed himself out—and, doubtless, heard, as he did so, Edith's too audible exclamation of—

“Thank goodness he's gone !”

“And now, my dear, what have I done wrong ?” said Margaret, as soon as they were alone, “I understood from you, that anybody would be welcome, and this was why I invited Monsieur de la Tour.”

“You might have remembered that I hated the little wretch,” said Edith, quite petulantly ; “however, you may amuse him, for I won’t.”

“You will undertake the baronet, then ?” asked Margaret, smiling good-humouredly, “for he, at all events, will be your guest, if he comes.”

“Oh, he won’t come,” grumbled the other ; and though, up to this moment, she had really cared very little whether he did or not, it now became a matter of lively interest, simply, because she chose, from perverseness, to consider it one of great improbability.

“This day, however, Margaret had fewer complaints to listen to—and as the evening advanced, Edith became almost cheerful—and even went, occasionally, in and out of the room, where milliners and workpeople were busy with her wedding finery ; some of which, (the bridal robe included) was in an advanced state, owing to the short time

the principal personage was able to give up to her country customers.

“Now, this is excessively nice and elegant,” said the young lady, turning round and round the costly lace dress that was to adorn her pretty person ; “how clever you must be, all of you, to get it done so soon and so well. I hope I shan’t look so very little, with this graceful, flowing skirt ?”

“Oh, miss,” exclaimed the milliner from London, “if you would but try it on, it would be doing me such a favour ; not but what it’s sure of fitting, but I should just like to see the effect, now it’s all ready ; and I could put the last stitches with so much more pleasure and satisfaction, if I had seen it well shown off, miss, as it will be on you. It’s true, there’s an old-fashioned prejudice against having the wedding dress fitted on before the day ; but ladies laugh at all those old wive’s fables now—the times being more enlightened. So, if you would

be so kind, Miss, I should really think it such a favour."

The good woman need not have wasted so many words, for Edith was nothing loth to see herself arrayed in the bridal white ; and as for supersition, who would let such nonsense as that interfere with the whim of a moment ? So the plain, lilac muslin was quickly cast aside for the delicate lace robe, and the wearer listened with some gratification to the evidently genuine expressions of admiration that echoed round the room. And now it was :

" Oh dear, ma'am, if you had but the veil and orange wreath, it would positively be quite a picture, and you've got such a beautiful colour now, which you're sure not to have on your marriage day, that it seems a pity to miss seeing you look your best as one may say."

" Oh, I've no objection," replied Edith, " if one of you will go and fetch the things. I believe they're in the wardrobe, set apart for all this new finery."

So the veil and wreath were brought, and, in a few minutes, the bride elect was contemplating herself in a cheval glass, and agreeing perfectly, in her own heart, with the opinions of the lookers on—that seldom had a bride been seen so faultless in face and figure, or, as one of the work-girls (who must have had a touch of romance in her nature) expressed it—“so angel-like and heavenly-looking.”

“We must call your sister to see you, miss, or she would never forgive us,” they now eagerly exclaimed; but Edith, who was like a child with a new toy, declared she would go and seek Margaret herself; and off she flew, with her shadowy drapery floating behind her, in the most graceful and picturesque manner you can imagine.

This was after dinner; and supposing her sister had gone to the drawing-room to await the arrival of their guest, Edith bent her rapid steps in that direction. Arriving at the door, she paused a moment to recover breath, and then, with her

cheeks all glowing, and her eyes flashing with the enjoyment of the moment, she flung it open, and stood revealed, like some spirit of beauty from fairyland, before the startled, dazzled gaze of Sir Stuart Bernade, and Monsieur de la Tour. Margaret was there also, but Edith did not discover her in the first moment of bewilderment.

Both gentlemen, by a mutual impulse, sprang to their feet, and then every faculty seemed absorbed in the one of vision. Not to look at Edith, as she then appeared, would have been, I believe, a moral impossibility ; and, at all events, it would have included an amount of self-denial that neither the Scotchman nor the Frenchman evinced the slightest intention of practising.

“*Qu'elle est charmante—qu'elle est divine!*” burst, at length, from the lips of Monsieur Eugène ; but the other spoke not a word, though the varying colour of his face

sufficiently attested his admiration—and something more.

Edith quickly recovered from her embarrassment, and advancing into the middle of the room, she said with the most simple air possible,

“I really had no intention of showing myself to either of you gentlemen, as I expected to find my sister alone; but since you *are* here, pray admire my dress, and do justice to the taste and skill of the *artiste*, whose clever fingers have fashioned it. Margaret, come forth, and pronounce judgment quickly, for I am beginning already to experience certain chill-forebodings. as though the demons of superstition were revenging themselves of my neglect of their warnings.”

“My dear Edith, you must perceive that we are all lost in admiration,” said Margaret, (for neither of the others now spoke a word) “but unless you intend to spend the evening in your present costume, I

should recommend you to change it at once, as I have ordered tea, and the gentlemen have been proposing a walk as soon as the sun goes down."

"Then I will follow your advice," replied Edith, and as she spoke, Monsieur Eugène rushed to open the door for her, in which act of gallantry, he was, however, foiled by the unexpected interference of Sir Stuart Bernarde, who quietly, but peremptorily, put him aside, and performed the duty himself.

"Thank you," Edith said, without raising her eyes as she passed out.

And still Sir Stuart kept his proud head erect, and spoke not a single word.

CHAPTER VI.

HEATHER LODGE.

WHEN Edith returned to the drawing-room, Margaret was talking to Monsieur de la Tour, and Sir Stuart Bernarde was standing with his back towards them, looking out of the open window, in a sort of sullen silence, not uncommon to him of late.

Edith glanced at him for a moment, and the shadow of a smile passed over her face as she did so—then drawing a chair

to the tea-table, she sat down quietly by her sister, and made no attempt, at present, to entertain the guest she had invited.

“Will you not come and take some tea, Sir Stuart,” Margaret said, at length, and then he turned round absently, and after the pause of a few seconds, came and seated himself in a vacant chair near Edith, to whom, however, he did not address a single word during the whole of tea time.

Major Lascelles joined the party before the meal was concluded, and with him the baronet conversed, leaving the ever lively and animated Frenchman to entertain the ladies. But Margaret, seeing probably that the evening would hang very heavily in this way, again proposed a walk, and as there were no dissenting voices it was soon arranged, and the dell, leading to Sir Stuart’s dwelling, fixed upon for their destination.

“Well, Edith, which of the gentlemen is to have you?” Margaret said, as they

were putting on their walking dresses ; “ for you know it is a matter of perfect indifference to me.”

“ Oh,” said Edith, in reply, “ you may take Sir Stuart, for though I hate the other, I shall prefer him for a companion this evening.”

The sister made no comment on this—only when the baronet offered her his arm, she accepted it immediately, and Monsieur Eugène, to his immense and visible satisfaction, took possession of the now silent and haughty looking Edith. For some time neither of the two last uttered a word, appearing completely absorbed in their own meditations, or in contemplating the beauties of the scenery around them ; but taciturnity, under any circumstances, was certainly not a failing of Monsieur de la Tour’s, and as they reached the rustic bridge, and paused for a moment to look down upon the clear, bubbling water, his thoughts abruptly shaped themselves into

words that were as startling as they were unauthorized and presuming.

“Mademoiselle Edith,” he said in his measured, disagreeable voice, “will soon be unable to count her victims. I had considered myself singular in my sufferings, but now I find one with wounds even deeper than my own, and whom I pity with all my heart.”

The flush was faint and scarcely perceptible on Edith’s cheek as she replied disdainfully.

“Your enigmas do not amuse me, Monsieur de la Tour, and you will greatly oblige me by keeping them to yourself for the future.”

“My enigma, as you please to call it, might have been guessed by the dullest person who had been present when you came into the room this evening with your bridal dress—however, since it displeases you I will say no more—you have had good news I hope of Mr. Boisragon and his charming sister.”

“Very good,” replied Edith, striving to speak cheerfully—“Alick is quite strong again, and his mother appears delighted that the journey was undertaken—nothing indeed could be more satisfactory than the letters I have received to-day.”

“I am glad you are so happy ; and that everything appears to smile upon you. It is strange to mark the different destinies that are appointed to human beings—some so bright and dazzling, others so dark and gloomy—I could not help thinking of you, when I read this morning in the pages of your greatest poet and philosopher these lines, which were marked strongly with a pencil :—

“ Why let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play,
For some must watch, whilst others sleep,
So runs the world away.”

“ And pray who had taken the trouble

to mark them ?” asked Edith, with more interest in her voice and look than she was conscious of betraying.

Eugène laughed a little inward demon laugh, as he replied, with an affected shrug of the shoulders.

“The owner of the book, I presume ; but I can enquire of him, if you please.”

“I do *not* please, Monsieur de la Tour,” said Edith, angrily, much too angrily for one who desired to appear profoundly indifferent, “but I *do* please that if you must talk, you refrain from everything personal. I will not endure your insolent insinuations.”

“Mademoiselle, I insinuate nothing. You are unjust to me as you have always been—but I do not complain. We will talk of something else. Have you ever been as far as Heather Lodge ?”

“No !”

“It is a pretty place for a bachelor ; and when Sir Stuart marries, I have no doubt he will have it fitted up for his wife

to come there when she pleases. —Miss Egerton, I understand, is very fond of this neighbourhood.”

“Indeed.”

“It will, too, be so agreeable for you both to be near each other—sisters-in-law—that is such a charming tie.”

“Is it? You appear to possess universal knowledge, Monsieur Eugène.”

“Oh no, I am very ignorant, but I have one faculty—that of observation—in a rather remarkable degree.”

“It must often be a fatal gift I should think—at least if it enables people to find out what concerns themselves, as well as that which relates to others.”

“You are right. It frequently causes infinite pain—but it is not without its advantages also. I would not be without it for the world.”

“And pray what has your wisdom discovered lately to make you rejoice in this wonderful faculty—Is the earth going to rush into the embraces of the sun, or are

Frenchmen about to be transformed into rational beings ?”

“Mademoiselle,” said Eugène, with the utmost politeness, “I leave these questions to the astronomers and philosophers of our enlightened world. If the earth is bent upon destroying itself in the embraces of the sun, I have no doubt the collision will take place—for why should the mother be wiser than her children, who are constantly scorching themselves in flames, that are as dangerous as they are dazzling ? My discoveries relate to the mistakes and errors of human hearts, which amuse me even more than vain speculations on the probability of Frenchmen becoming rational.”

Looking intensely satisfied with this speech, Eugène waited anxiously for a reply ; but none came, for Edith apparently had ceased to be conscious of his presence, and was entirely wrapt up in her own thoughts. When she did speak, it was only to say—

“I should like to see Heather Lodge—run on and ask Sir Stuart and my sister if we can go so far.”

Eugène obeyed this command with alacrity, returning in a few minutes, with the intelligence that the walk might easily be accomplished, and that Sir Stuart had appeared delighted at the proposition.

During the remainder of the way neither Edith nor her companion spoke a dozen words, and when they had arrived within a few yards of the house, Sir Stuart and Margaret waited for them, and they all walked on together.

“This is but a poor place, Miss Lascelles,” said the master of the lodge, addressing Edith, “but you will make allowances for a bachelor’s accommodations ; and honour me by coming in and taking a glass of wine after your long walk.”

Edith looked at Margaret, who replied immediately that they would do so with pleasure, and then Sir Stuart, suddenly leaving the side of his first companion,

offered an arm to Edith, and as Margaret declined the other (from politeness to Monsieur de la Tour) these two entered the house together.

“It is all quite charming and requires no apology ;” said Edith, as she was led into the pretty, comfortable little dining-room before described. “You must be very happy in your hermit solitude, Sir Stuart.”

“Do you think so ?” he replied, with his saddest smile, “would solitude, however adorned, suffice for *your* happiness ?”

“Mine ? oh no—I detest solitude, but then I am gay and naturally sociable ; while you are grave and reserved, and seem to feed on melancholy.”

“It is a species of food I have no fancy for, notwithstanding. I would willingly be gay and light-hearted if I could ; but I greatly fear the gift is not in me.”

“But when you are married, Annie will make you gay. It will be all well with you then.”

Sir Stuart turned away abruptly, and gave a chair to Margaret, who was close behind. Edith seated herself near the window, and spoke no more till the wine and fruit made their appearance, when she accepted some of the latter from the hand of her host, and began a lively conversation with both the gentlemen.

Margaret was greatly delighted with the place, and admired particularly a steep hill that rose immediately at the back of the lodge, and was covered now with large patches of purple heather. Edith was summoned to look at it from the window, and like a child she declared her intention of attempting the ascent at once, and her wish, moreover, to go alone.

“But it is getting so late,” said Margaret, “and you must remember that we have still a long walk before us—had you not better come another day?”

“No, no, now or never,” replied this wilful young creature, hastily tying her bonnet, and adjusting her shawl. “It will

not take me many minutes to reach the top, and when I am there I will sing you a song, and you shall fancy me the spirit of the glen."

Of course neither Sir Stuart nor his friend ventured any expostulations, but they all followed her slowly out, and as she still insisted on going alone, they seated themselves on a smooth mound, and watched her rapid ascent with the interest Edith, in her simplest actions, always contrived to inspire.

Margaret, who seemed really annoyed at this apparently childish freak, remarked once to Sir Stuart that her sister required a little more discipline than she had yet undergone ; but he looked so surprised and confounded at the speech, and appeared so unable to receive the idea, that the speaker was effectually silenced, and driven back to her own rather anxious meditations.

Now dear reader, you must try to picture to yourself the scene—the wild, lonely dell, rendered yet more solemn and

picturesque by the rapid approach of the dim, mysterious twilight—the dark, ivy-covered lodge, standing in solitary grace at the foot of the towering hill, behind which, rising slowly and majestically, came the pale, summer moon, casting its faint beams on that light, gazelle-like figure, which moves on, and upwards, as swiftly as a flitting shadow, and never pauses to cast one glance upon the silent watchers below.

Silent, because they were all in different ways impressed by the scene and hour, and because there was not one amongst them who could at that moment think of anything apart from Edith, and not one who would have chosen to communicate the nature of these thoughts. At last the highest part of the hill is reached, and then, standing there like a speck of light, amongst the dark, clustering heather—

“ Her warbling voice, a lyre of widest range
Struck by all passion, did fall down and glance
From tone to tone, and glided through all change
Of liveliest utterance.”

There are some impulses of the human soul which cannot be accounted for on any known or common principles, some sudden promptings of the heart which will not be resisted, and which cause as much, if not more astonishment to ourselves in cooler moments, than they do to those who have not the same means of judging of our secret natures. Sir Stuart Bernarde was, as you must have seen by this time, far from an impulsive or demonstrative character ; he would have shrunk from opening the inner sanctuary of his heart to the nearest and dearest friend he ever possessed ; he would have died rather than acknowledge a weakness, or admit that any temptation could assail him which his own strength would be insufficient to resist.

Yet this proud and unbending man was destined to prove the impotence of a human will, opposed to human passion—to prove also that in the inner existence there are freaks as strange and startling, as any that astonish naturalists and philosophers in the outer world.

While Edith sang he had sat like one in a dream, grave, composed, but entirely abstracted, his eyes fixed on the spot where she stood, and his arms crossed tightly, in a way that was usual to him when quite alone.

But the song, which was a wild Italian serenade, suddenly ceased, and the singer began to descend the hill rapidly, waving her handkerchief fantastically as she came. Without a word of explanation, without a look or sign to his companions, Sir Stuart sprang from his seat, and almost before they could conjecture as to the cause of this abrupt movement, he was standing by Edith's side and both appeared to be talking fast and earnestly.

Margaret rose instantly with an unwonted colour on her cheek, and, followed closely by Monsieur de la Tour, walked quickly to meet the pair.

But they came on slowly now, very slowly ; and when at length they reached those they had left so strangely, Edith was looking pale and agitated, and Sir Stuart flushed and excited.

The latter did not speak, but when Margaret in a tone almost of severity advised their immediate return, he offered her his arm, and Edith was left again to the protection of Monsieur Eugène.

The moon shone out in vain that night, wrapping the beautiful dell in its mantle of silvery brightness ; and in vain the cool breeze stirred the grass, and played amongst the tall shadowy trees. Of the four who traversed that lonely road, not one had an eye for the riches which nature had scattered around them, not one had a heart sufficiently free from care to raise itself in adoration to the Bounteous Maker of the glorious and eternal heavens.

A spirit of evil was abroad that night, watching for human souls ; and a more tempting gift than all the kingdoms of the earth, he was offering to two weak mortals, if they would but fall down and worship him.

CHAPTER VII.

DUCKS AND DRAKES.

AT the door of the Manor-house the gentlemen said adieu, for Margaret either forgot or did not choose to ask them to come in. Edith, without speaking to her sister, then took a bed-room candle from the hall table, and just looking in, as she passed her father's room, to bid him good night, went at once to her own sleeping apartment, and turning the key of the door with nervous haste, threw herself on the bed,

and cried passionately, like a child who has been hurt, rather than like a woman who has been grieved.

The heart's tears do not flow while the serpent holds the dazzling, tempting fruit, before us, while the question of acceptance or rejection is still undecided ; for though a consciousness of weakness may disturb and irritate the mind in the short pauses of passion, there is nothing of real sorrow in this, nothing that the heart, with its subtle eloquence, may not quickly dispel. It is reserved for the moment in which we discover that the power of rejection is no longer ours, to wring from the soul those tears, which burn as they fall ; and leave traces, that Time itself with all its mighty enchantments, can never efface.

Edith was not very unhappy at present but she was restless and excited, and there was a bewilderment, and a hurry in her thoughts, which made tears a necessity and a relief to her. They did not, how-

ever, continue long. She had the fullest confidence in her own strength ; and in her own will to resist temptation. It was thus that, after half-an-hour's rapid paces to and fro in her quiet room, she gave expression to her feelings on a sheet of paper, scattered over with a whole sisterhood of kneeling nuns.

“ This morning all was calm and contentment in my heart, a settled if not a brilliant sunshine. To-night all is confusion and warfare, with heavy clouds that betoken a coming storm. But is it my fault, am I to blame because feelings, that I had imagined for ever conquered, have, for a moment, burst the iron chains in which I bound them, and come forth to mock and torture me ? Is not the suffering enough without the condemnation ? must conscience, in spite of all the sacrifices I have made to it, rise up against me, speaking hard and bitter words ? But I will not heed them, for they are unde-

served. My faith, in my own resolution is strong and assured. Poor indeed, and weak must be that virtue, which will not endure the fire of temptation, which yields to the syren's magic voice, and rushes madly into the whirlpool, though knowing that it will there be destroyed. *Mia madre*, you were a true prophetess, your own pure mind had a foreshadowing of that which has now come to pass; but rest in peace, kind and gentle heart, for no pang shall ever visit thee through me. As yet, I have given no way to the tempter—as yet, the future is in my own hands—and not only the future, but the happiness, perhaps the life, of more than one good and trusting being. Surely this thought alone is sufficient for my safety—surely no temptation could be powerful enough to make me forget how much, how very much is involved in my faith and truth. Away then, seductive and bewildering fancies—away ye fair and exciting dreams! Edith is herself again, and she

defies your boasted strength, she laughs at your imagined power."

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When the sisters met the following morning at breakfast, there was a cloud upon Margaret's brow, which Edith perfectly understood, and, therefore, refrained from noticing ; but, confident in her own good resolutions, she felt that her sister was doing her injustice, and this created an irritation of mind which prevented any advance, on her part, towards a reconciliation, while Margaret was too anxious and too unhappy to care, at present, for the estrangement between them. She was, in fact, debating as to whether it would be wiser to speak to Edith on the occurrence of the past evening or not, and the result of her meditations was a resolve to say

nothing at present, but to watch diligently, and keep her young sister as much as possible out of the way of temptation.

“You will write to Devonshire this morning, will you not?” she said, as they both got up to leave the breakfast table.

“Yes,” replied Edith, rather sullenly—
“have you any message?”

“My love, of course—nothing more.”

Edith moved towards the door, and turning round, when she had opened it, said, in an indifferent tone—

“By the bye, can you lend me your drawing pencils? I am going out to sketch a little when I have done writing.”

“Certainly, if you want them—but where are you going?”

“To the bridge, I think.”

Margaret’s cheek flushed a little, and after the pause of a few seconds, she said, in a decisive voice—

“I will go with you, Edith.”

“Oh, as you please,” replied the other, with a slightly contemptuous smile. “If

you have any fancy for being my watch-dog, I'm sure *I* have no objection."

To this Margaret made no answer ; and Edith immediately walked, with a stately step, out of the room.

The letters to Devonshire were considerably shorter than usual on this occasion—they contained indeed little besides excuses for not writing longer ones ; but Edith reconciled this to her conscience by the assertion that she had really nothing to write about, and that they should soon meet again.

"Are you ready, Margaret?" she said, looking into her sister's room, half-an-hour after, in her walking dress. "The sun is getting very hot, and if I do not go now, I cannot go at all."

"I will come at once then," Margaret replied, putting away the work she had been doing. "Are your letters finished so soon?"

"Yes—I really cannot write volumes every time—we shall meet in two or three

weeks, and there will be little enough to talk about, as it is."

"I am quite ready now, Edith—Let me carry your drawing book for you."

There was such a mingling of kindness and earnestness at all times in Margaret's manner, that few tempers, however wilful, could long resist it ; but when she exerted herself to please, when, with a good object in view, she opened the stores of her clear and reflective, though essentially feminine mind, there was a charm around her, which drew every heart within its circle. Not Edith herself (with that fairy beauty and "witching ways," that had already done so much mischief,) could call into existence greater power than the grave and quiet Margaret, when it was her will to do so.

And it was her will at present, not only to soothe the wayward temper of her sister, but to interest and, if possible, engross her mind, to the exclusion of dangerous and forbidden objects, for Margaret was not

altogether ignorant of human nature, and she knew that many a pure heart had become corrupt from no mightier cause than ennui, and the dearth of wholesome mental food.

Where the natural disposition is good it is not very difficult to charm away the evil spirits, and thus Edith was easily led by her sister into a calmer and better train of thought, which brought with it her sunniest smiles and softest words, though there was only Margaret to be fascinated by them.

“And the sketch—when will you begin it?” said the latter, as they stood side by side on the rustic bridge, gazing idly into the clear stream whose gentle murmuring mingled pleasantly with their low voices.

“Oh never mind the sketch now,” said Edith, picking up a handful of pebbles to throw into the water. “It is much more amusing to make ducks and drakes, and to hear you talk, than to scratch crooked lines with a pencil. When I am married,

Margey, I shall often bring Alick with me here, to make ducks and drakes—don't you think he will like it?"

"There is no occupation, Edith, that Alick would not like, I fancy, with you by his side," replied Margaret, rather gravely.

"He is certainly very fond of me—nobody could doubt that—could they?"

"Assuredly not, dear Edith. It will demand incessant watchfulness on your part to keep from wounding an affection so boundless and—I was going to say unreasonable—but as that may sound harsh to you, I will only call it romantic—I know this is a word you have a liking for."

"Yes, because it comprehends something out of the common way—but, Margey, do you still think that I should have been happier with an every day sort of husband, such as I once described to you, than I am likely to be with Alick."

"My dear Edith, if Alick becomes your husband, I shall believe that he is the one

best adapted to you, and that my former judgment was incorrect, because my religion teaches me that every event of our lives is directed and arranged by a Higher and Wiser Power."

"What a pleasant and comfortable doctrine that is—I wish I could adopt it, and so quiet at once and for ever, all the struggles that are agitating my troublesome heart at present."

"What struggles, Edith?" said Margaret, quickly, and laying her hand suddenly and impressively upon her sister's shoulder. But fortunately for the veracity of the latter a messenger arrived just at that moment from the house, requesting Margaret's immediate return to her father; and Edith, after grumbling a little and vacillating a great deal as to what she should do, remained to make ducks and drakes upon the bridge alone.

Half an hour after, two were standing there, and the sketch book still lay idly upon the ground, though the new comer

was only Monsieur de la Tour, whom Edith hated with all her heart.

He might have said to himself in explanation of the satisfaction his presence appeared to confer on this occasion—“*Je ne suis pas la rose, mais j'ai vécu avec elle.*”

And yet Edith, though she did listen with well pleased ear to the cunning Frenchman's account of Sir Stuart's deep dejection, was as full of good resolutions as she had ever been, and tried very hard to persuade herself that the interest she felt in the subject arose from her affection for Nettia—the anxiety she naturally experienced for the happiness of her future sister.

“You must allow me the pleasure of carrying home your sketch-book,” said Eugène, as Edith, at the end of another half hour, made a movement of departure.

“And I have not drawn a single line, I declare,” said the latter, neither declining nor accepting his attendance. “To-morrow

I will be more industrious, for I am quite ashamed of myself."

"You will come to the bridge again to-morrow then?"

"Probably—if I do not change my mind—but don't imagine I want you, for I shan't speak to you if you come."

In delivering up the drawing-book at the door of the house, Monsieur Eugène asked if he should take any message to the baronet.

Edith said "No" very abruptly, and the young man departed, uttering softly as he took off his hat, "*A demain.*"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BARONET'S SICKNESS.

MARGARET met her sister in the hall, and told her that their father was taken suddenly ill, that the doctor had prohibited him from seeing any one besides herself at present, and that Edith must therefore be content to dine and spend the evening alone. "I am assured there is no danger," continued the speaker, observing her sister's rapid change of colour. "A good night's rest will quite restore him; but every

species of agitation must be avoided. He has just swallowed a composing medicine, and I am going to fetch some work, and watch by him for the rest of the day. Amuse yourself as well as you can, dear, and do not encourage the least uneasiness."

This sudden illness of the Major's was most unfortunate for Edith, as solitude just now was about the worst thing that could happen to her. During her scarcely tasted dinner she thought a good deal of her father, but hearing from the servants that he was sleeping calmly, her anxieties were quickly dispelled, and for the remainder of the evening, having nothing to do, she suffered her thoughts to wander withersoever they listed—and they strayed, I am afraid, into other places besides Devonshire, and included other matters than wedding bonnets and bridal tours.

The next morning Major Lascelles was pronounced much better, but after seeing his youngest child for a few minutes, he

sent her away, and shut himself up in the library with Margaret, where they remained writing letters, or reading them, till Edith, impatient at the apparent mystery, and quite tired of her own society, took up her book and pencils, and walked forth, in the direction of the rustic bridge, alone.

This time a drawing was begun—but there was evidently a restlessness both in the eyes and in the fingers of the artist—for the first wandered oftener down the glen than towards the object on which they should have looked, and the last made strange blunders, and did great discredit to the skill of their fair owner.

She had chosen for her seat, the stump of an old tree at the foot of the first gentle descent of the dell—a spot which commanded a very picturesque view of the little bridge, and was not very many yards distant from it. The summer air was blowing sweetly and pleasantly upon her cheek ; the cheerful hum of insects fell upon her ear—she sighed gently and softly, and thought

how charming it would be to have a congenial companion in a scene so delightful, and in an hour so soothing as this ; and then a deep blush mounted to her very temples, and her heart beat thickly, either with fear or pleasure, as a footstep (as if in answer to her wish) came rapidly along the pathway, seeming to crush the sun-dried turf in its impatient tread.

“I *will* be calm and dignified,” said Edith, to herself, keeping her head bent down and guiding her pencil at random ; “I will be a miracle of coldness and disdain ; he shall have no chance of uttering a single forbidden word. I will shew him, at least, that a woman is not the weak creature he imagines—that where man in all his pride is vanquished, she can, if she will, come forth more than conqueror.”

Alas, for all this waste of noble resolutions—and alas, poor Edith ! when she turned round, at length, expecting to behold the melancholy and heart-broken countenance of Sir Stuart Bernarde, and

saw only the apish form of Eugène de la Tour, bowing and grinning hideously before her.

The re-action was perfectly fearful, and Eugène was clear sighted enough to understand it all, and to shape his plans accordingly. He would not be driven away by Edith's hauteur; her rudeness had no effect upon him. He talked incessantly, and of every subject in the world, except Sir Stuart, though he knew that this was the only theme which could make his presence tolerable to his most ungracious companion. Only, as she rose to go, and peremptorily forbade his accompanying her, he said, in quite an indifferent tone, though watching her as a cat watches a mouse.

"By-the-bye, Sir Stuart is very ill. I left the doctor with him."

Where then was woman's pride, as Edith turned, with flashing eyes upon the startled speaker, and reviled him, in no measured terms, for having so long withheld this communication, and for being

absent one moment from his too generous, too condescending, friend.

“You,” she continued passionately, “who ought to consider it an honour to live, for a single day, under the same roof with him; you, who are not worthy to be his servant even—you, whom he has deigned to admit to familiar companionship—how dare you leave him now, when you may be of some little use—ungrateful, cruel, detestable being that you are!”

Eugène, to his credit be it said, bore all this abuse exceedingly well, and ventured not a single word in retaliation, though he might have had a decided advantage now, if he had pleased. But he placed it quietly below the long account against Edith, which he had for so many months kept securely in his malicious heart, and was quite satisfied for the present, to appear the smiling, easy fool, she deemed him.

“I left Sir Stuart,” he said, at last,

“because his physician ordered that he should be alone for a few hours, and because, I believed I had an appointment with you, mademoiselle. I shall now return and try to be of *some little use*, as you say.”

Edith bit her lip angrily, and seemed to be struggling desperately with some inward feeling. If it was pride, this passion was surely never more completely subdued—for she smoothed, by degrees, her ruffled brow, composed her troubled features into comparative repose, modulated her lately indignant tones into the most amiable accents, while she demanded a clearer account of the baronet’s illness, and then ended by requesting Eugène to meet her in the same place on the following morning, to report the progress of the disorder, which he told her was suspected to be the commencement of brain fever.

Edith rejoiced this day in the continued pre-occupation of her father and sister,

and the consequent solitude to which she was doomed. Her mind was in a tumult that would have rendered any society insupportable, and after casually mentioning to Margaret the intelligence she had heard, she shut herself in her own room, and yielded, without further effort, to the feelings of gloom and despair that were gathering fast upon her.

There was no record of unhappiness now, no written evidence of the heart's passionate struggles—All these were ended for the time, and Edith knew and acknowledged that she would have given the best years of her life for the privilege of watching by the sick bed of Sir Stuart Bernarde.

A little quickening of the pulses, a little parching of the skin, a little prostration of that strength which is man's only superiority, had done far more for him than months of unwearied devotion would have been able to accomplish.

Alas! for poor Alick, recovering health

and vigour in his distant home—Could he look now through a magic glass how would his dreams of happiness be dispelled—how would he loathe that life which he is cherishing with such anxious care to devote wholly and entirely to her—to her, whose every thought is given to another, who sleeps not during the long night, but sits alone, counting the weary hours, and longing only for the return of day, because it will bring her tidings of one she loves far better than her future husband. Alas! I say again, for poor Alick.

Long before the appointed time, Edith, flushed and excited, was pacing up and down the narrow pathway, near the spot where Eugène had promised to meet her. The sun this day was positively scorching in its heat; not a breath of wind was stirring—the tall, motionless trees had a strange and solemn look, and seemed, to Edith's disordered imagination, like warning ghosts, standing in gloomy array before her. How she execrated the tardy messenger, as her

impatience and excitement increased—how she stamped with her little foot on the burning grass, and wrung her hands, and strained her eyes to catch the first glimpse of that form which she had always hated to behold till now.

And at length he came, rejoicing in his inmost heart to witness the misery of the woman who had scorned him.

“ Well,” said Edith, forgetting or disdaining, in her impatience, the ordinary greetings of courtesy, “ what news do you bring—tell me all at once, and conceal nothing on your peril.”

“ He is not worse ;” was the reply, as Eugène, hot and tired, threw himself familiarly on the turf at Edith’s side, “ but the doctor refuses to give a decided opinion yet. I went last night to the cottage, and Miss Cargill returned with me, and is with Sir Stuart now.”

“ Is there anything more to tell ?” Edith said, hoarsely, and without turning to her companion.

“ Not much. He passed a bad night, but I left him sleeping. Miss Cargill wished to write to his *fiancée*, but Sir Stuart forbids it at present—You look ill, Mademoiselle Edith,—will you not take my arm to walk home.”

“ No, I am well, quite well—To-morrow I shall be here again—do not fail me, or keep me waiting.”

And without another word or glance, she turned abruptly away ; and Eugène watched her retreating figure, and smiled complacently as he muttered to himself again “ *Chacun à son tour.*”

On arriving at home, Edith found Miss Eliza Cargill with Margaret, to whom the good spinster had been relating the particulars, as far as she knew them, of Sir Stuart’s sudden illness ; and they were both discoursing gravely but calmly about it, as Edith entered. To endure to sit down, as a quiet listener, was of course entirely beyond her strength, so pleading a violent head-ache from the effects of the sun, she

escaped at once to her room, and in the latter part of the day Margaret was again closetted with her father, who had suffered a slight relapse, and Edith had the dismal satisfaction of being alone and unobserved.

The following morning, soon after the arrival of the letter-bag, Margaret came to her sister's bed-side in a travelling dress, and told her that she was obliged to go to London immediately, on private business of her father's, but that she expected to be back in a week at latest. At any other time Edith would not have been content with this vague explanation, neither would the hurry and agitation of Margaret's manner have escaped her observation ; but, at present, passion's voice drowned even that of curiosity, and with a hasty embrace, unaccompanied by a single question, she suffered her sister to depart, while Margaret on her side rejoiced amidst her surprise at escaping the strict catechizing she had naturally expected, and if something like

the true solution of the mystery glanced afterwards across her mind, she reconciled herself to it by the reflection that the same cause would prevent any dangerous meetings, during the short period of her absence.

To Edith this absence was an immense relief, and though her father, who continued in a singularly nervous and irritable state, claimed a considerable portion of her society at present, she always contrived to be at the trysting-place even before her messenger arrived, to receive daily accounts of the progress of the invalid, to rejoice or tremble as the case might be, or rather as Eugène chose to report it. For glorying in the power he now possessed over the weak woman who had presumed to despise him, he resolved to prolong her tortures, and for many days after Sir Stuart had been pronounced convalescent, he kept her in the most agonizing suspense, and only gave her hope at last, when he saw that her strength had been taxed to the very ut-

most, and that nature was sinking under the struggle. A fit of hysterical tears had followed Eugène's cheering communication on the day in question, and he seated himself unasked and with impertinent freedom beside her, and attempted words of consolation and encouragement, to which Edith was too weak and too utterly subdued to make any reply. It was only indeed to the concluding sentence that she paid the least attention, and it was this—

“Sir Stuart has been ordered to walk a little in the cool of the evening, and to-night he proposes coming down the glen. He will probably be alone, as he has taken a distaste for all society.”

For one moment Edith's heart bounded wildly, and then a chill weight came upon it, as she felt how completely she must have fallen from her high estate when the contemptible creature at her side dared to speak, and she to hear without rebuke a sentence so full of meaning as this. But she would not be hypocrite enough to

feign indignation, and after slightly thanking Eugène for his services, and bowing with her usual coldness, she walked away, feeling for the first time in her life that self-contempt, which is, of all other feelings, the most torturing and inconsolable to a proud and sensitive heart.

“There are letters for you, miss, in the parlour,” said a servant, whom Edith met on entering the house ; and shuddering, as if she had been suddenly struck, the unhappy girl walked on to find them, and to read those expressions of ardent fondness from her absent lover, which could now inspire but the deepest shame and remorse.

“In another week,” wrote poor Alick, “I shall be with you again, my own beautiful and worshipped Edith ; I shall hear your dear voice, I shall look into your sweet eyes ; I shall clasp you to my heart, and feel that it is still beating true and

warm for me, and that you are at length indeed my own, my very own for ever and for ever."

These words and many more of equally passionate devotion, swam before Edith's eyes, as she tried with desperate resolution to read them ; and when the long letter was quite gone through, she crushed it nervously and excitedly in her feverish hand, and took up another that still lay unopened on the table beside her. This was from Mrs. Boisragon, and filled, like her son's, with warm expressions of attachment towards her future daughter-in-law, mingled, however, with accounts of Alick's improved health and spirits, and her own happy prognostications respecting the coming marriage. It was in this way the letter concluded—

"And now, my beloved child, that our month of probation is so nearly expired, I

may confess how foolishly nervous and even superstitious I have been about it—how, from the night before we parted, a weight has hung upon my spirits, and a presentiment of some shadowy evil has at times sickened my very heart. But all such old woman's fancies are rapidly dispersing now, and in the light of my own Alick's joyous smiles, I too am growing as happy and as hopeful as himself—My good Nettia has been a great comfort to us both—May Heaven reward her for all her lifelong tenderness and affection! She appears to contemplate her own marriage with quiet, but, I am sure, heartfelt happiness. God grant that Stuart Bernarde may ever retain the will, as well as the power, to make her truly blessed. Adieu, my own sweet Edith—your fond mother's prayers are with you.

“C. B.”

Over this letter Edith wept with a passionate violence that was positively

alarming ; but there were none to witness her tears, and by slow degrees an outward calmness returned to her, and she pressed her hands tightly to her throbbing temples, and tried earnestly to think—To think of what she ought to do, to decide what line of conduct would now be most consistent with justice, delicacy, truth and womanly honour.

Alas ! the claims of some of these seemed strangely at variance in the present case. and a much wiser head than Edith's might have been puzzled to come to a clear decision. Had Alick alone been concerned, standing unsupported as a rival to the other, I fear Edith would not have debated long — but there were two more to be placed in the scale with him, one of these tenderly beloved, and what chance could Sir Stuart have against the three ?

In whichever way Edith considered the matter, it appeared to her that nothing but misery could result from the present most unhappy position of affairs. If she married

Alick, continuing to deceive him as to the state of her heart, she must expect to endure the sharpest reproaches of conscience, and her whole life must be a lie. If, on the other hand, she broke her engagement and acknowledged that she had misunderstood her own feelings, what might not be the consequences to him, loving so passionately or, as Margaret had said, so unreasonably as he did. Mrs. Boisragon had declared that her son's very life was bound up in the constancy of his promised wife, and though this statement might have been made from an excess of maternal anxiety, Edith knew well that Alick was not a person to get lightly over a disappointment in which his ardent affections were concerned.

What then, she asked herself 'again and again--What, then, can I, ought I to do ?

* It ended as many such mental debates too frequently do end, in a determination to leave all to fate, and to be guided by

circumstances instead of by conscience or honour.

It may be thought, though, that Edith took some of these expected circumstances too much under her own control, when she resolved to brave her destiny by going to the dell that night.

CHAPTER IX.

AN IMPORTANT INTERVIEW.

“Do not leave me, this evening, Edith,” said Major Lascelles to his daughter, as the latter, after making her father’s tea, showed symptoms of impatience to get away from him—“This is your last day of bondage, remember ; as Margaret will certainly be home to-morrow.”

“Dear papa, do not call it bondage—I am always very happy to be with you ; but when I have read or sung you to sleep,

I will just take a little walk, to drive away a nasty headache that has been tormenting me since dinner."

"Oh, if you have a headache, my love, that is quite another thing ; I will not have you read to me, but if it does not make the pain worse, perhaps you would sing one of my favourite songs before you go—something soft and low and soothing."

" ' Love not,' papa ?"

"Ay ! ' Love not,' my dear," said the poor Major, with a sigh, and closing his eyes, he leant back in his easy chair, and long before the conclusion of Edith's melancholy ballad, he was sleeping as calmly and tranquilly as though love had never been more to him than the sing-song sentiment, it doubtless appeared at present.

Edith rose gently from the piano, and walked to her father's side.

"Poor papa," she said, bending to kiss his pale forehead, " he has had his share of this world's troubles ; but they are all over now, while mine, alas ! are not only to

come, but are coming this very hour fast and thick upon me. Why have I not a guardian angel at hand, to show me the right path, and to force me into it—A mother! oh, why have I never known a mother's love, a mother's tender care!—Wretched being that I am—who is there to lament my errors, or to encourage me in the few virtues I may possess?"

A single moment's reflection must have convinced Edith of the gross injustice of these complaints; but people who fear their own conscience take singular pains to drive away reflection, and have generally, too, a peculiar habit of accusing destiny and circumstance of all the miseries which befall them. Edith having once made up her mind to transfer all the blame of her actions to some mysterious power, over which she had no control, suffered herself to be led unresistingly by the impulses of her undisciplined and passionate nature; and these led her now to seek the presence of that

person whom, above all others in the world, she ought to have avoided.

The evening was calm and fair, just such a one as that which had preceded Alick's departure, and Edith, in spite of a strong endeavour, could not help recalling it vividly, as she walked alone through the same green lanes, that she had traversed with him and his mother, and passed the very spot where she had picked the daisy and offered it as an emblem of her own fidelity and truth. There were thousands of these simple flowers blooming at present beneath her feet, but she trod upon them haughtily and disdainfully, trying to persuade herself that there had been far more of folly in making promises of constancy, than there was of guilt in breaking them. Nevertheless she experienced a powerful sensation of relief when these familiar lanes were passed, and leaving the village road on the right she could turn into a path that led in an opposite direction to the

Heather dell, the object of her present destination.

The little rustic bridge—how pretty and quiet it looked, nestled amidst its green willows, and spanning the bright sparkling water, on whose surface the gentlest ripple was playing, as it glided on peacefully and monotonously, murmuring soft music as it went. What a rebuke to human passions appeared this calm and smiling scene, over which the rapidly sinking sun was flinging that exquisite glow a summer sunset alone can produce. Even Edith, with her mind all warped, and her judgment all distorted as it was at present, was compelled to pause and look around her, with a feeling almost of loathing for herself—for the state of her own heart, opposed to this bright, calm picture of nature.

But unfortunately the spot where she now stood was associated too much with Stuart Bernarde to render any good impressions durable. It was here she had listened with willing ear to the cunning

Frenchman's carefully selected revelations—it was here she had come day after day to learn the progress of that malady which even without any suggestions from another, her vanity would have taught her to believe had been caused by the magic of her own bright eyes. It was here too that long, long ago, looking curiously into the depths of the wild and then unfamiliar glen, she had speculated on the chances of the proud Scotchman realizing the ideal she had formed of the man who could win her heart.

Yet, pause a little, Edith, and think, for the last time, of what you are about to do. Ay, lean once more on that wooden parapet, which, frail as it seems, is far stronger than your good resolutions—lean over the little bridge, and look with your young, strong eyes steadily into the clear water. It may show you other things besides your own fair image, and the shining pebbles that have their dwelling in its shallow bed.

It may show you a pale girl standing by

the road side, gazing wildly and fearfully into the distance—straining her gentle eyes to discern what she fancies will prove to be her lover's dead or dying form. *Her* lover, Edith! What have you to do with him?

It may show you, too, a countenance beaming with all a mother's tender and confiding love, gazing down on two youthful figures, whose hands are locked tightly together, as they listen reverently to the pure, maternal blessing.

The blessing was for you, Edith. Are you daring enough to change it into a curse?

Look longer, yet, into the magic water, and you will see visions from the future as well as from the past. But you will not look—you will not stay. There is, indeed, no guardian angel to arrest your footsteps now. The tempter has triumphed, and soon he will demand the price of the bauble he has so easily sold you.

Reader, if you desire to be present at

the interview in which the fate of so many was involved, follow me along the lonely glen, and your curiosity shall be gratified.

Sir Stuart Bernarde had not, as you may suppose, been kept in ignorance of Edith's daily meeting with Eugène de la Tour. No look—no word indicative of her anxiety about him, had the wily Frenchman left untold, and, on a mind weakened by illness, these communications had produced all the effect that was desired—they had lulled to sleep a judgment naturally deficient in stability, and inflamed an imagination always too ready to be excited. Stuart Bernarde's character would have been an admirable one, but for this unfortunate preponderance of the imaginative over the reasoning faculties. His heart rarely, if ever, led him astray, while his imagination was constantly in danger of doing so. When after a few weeks' acquaintance, he proposed to Miss Egerton it was with the full conviction that she was the woman calculated, above all others he had ever seen, to

render him happy. He admired, esteemed, and loved her with his reason, and with his heart, and had Edith never come in his way, there is no doubt that he would have continued perfectly satisfied with the choice he had made—but Edith did most unfortunately, and in an evil hour, cross his path, and with her singular beauty, thrilling voice, and captivating, because uncommon, manners, exercised, at once, a powerful effect upon his inflammable imagination.

Yet he did not cease to love Nettia, as many in similar cases would have done—only this love grew into a calm, fraternal sentiment, leaving all the fire and passion of his nature to be concentrated in the dangerous feeling Edith had inspired.

Dangerous but to himself, in the first instance, because principle and honour obtained a temporary victory over inclination; and even while suspecting Edith of looking kindly upon him, he could urge

another to propose to her, and return resolutely to his own allegiance.

All this was undoubtedly meritorious, and had Sir Stuart been less proud than he was, there might have been no more difficulty to overcome—but his pride urged him to seek rather than to shun temptations, which he felt now he was strong enough to trample upon. Unhappy man! he learned, when it was too late, that all human strength is but weakness in disguise—and that those who would really be victorious, must trust to a power less frail and uncertain than their own.

Look at him as he walks now with slow and feeble steps, and head bent down towards the place where he knows she will come to meet him. Does that pale and anxious countenance betoken a heart and conscience at rest, or give the idea of a man who has, at length, within his grasp, the object of his most earnest craving.

Stuart Bernarde, are you a coward at

this eleventh hour ? or have you, too, been looking into the magic waters ? Shake off these signs of gloom and unmanly dejection, and give a smiling welcome to her who dares all—and dares it bravely and cheerfully for you.

Yes, there is nothing of fear, or hesitation, or repentance, in Edith's aspect, as she comes lightly along the path, where the proud man waits to receive her ; there are burning blushes on her cheek, and a light that is not usual in her eye—but these only add to her beauty, and make her lover forget all but that she is before him—that they are alone—and that he may, unrebuked, pour into her ear the thousand passionate thoughts, that every word and look of hers have so long inspired.

His voice is thick and tremulous as he seizes the little, half-reluctant hands, and whispers rapturously,

“ Edith—my Edith now—beautiful, be-

loved! How shall I ever thank you for this goodness?"

And she—shocked at his altered appearance—melted by the tenderness of his tones, suffered herself to be encircled by his arm, while there sprang from her heart to her lips words of such fond and earnest love, that Stuart, intoxicated as he listened, swore to live and die for her alone, and entreated her, that very hour, to fly with him, and permit him, in his own country, to assume a husband's right to protect her—so that come what might, they should never more be divided.

But Edith had sufficient reason remaining to oppose a plan so wild as this. She had passed the rubicon, it is true. She knew she could never now fulfil her vows to Alick; but still it was her wish and her intention to convey to him the knowledge of her faithlessness as gently and as delicately as she could. Stuart listened quietly, and without remark, to all her

suggestions. He would do whatever she advised. She need have no fears about Alick, (for Edith had hinted something about the laws of honour among men, he might send a challenge every day in the year—he might brand his cousin as a coward over all the earth ; but it would be in vain, “For sooner would I myself be torn limb from limb by wild beasts,” said Sir Stuart, with much emotion, “than harm one hair of Alick Boisragon’s head,”

“I know it, I feel it,” Edith answered, quickly ; “you will do everything that is generous and kind and noble.”

What a look of sharp pain shot like a meteor across his countenance at these words.

“Edith,” he said, almost sternly, “avoid any expressions of approval respecting my conduct. For I feel, and *you* must feel, that I am sacrificing, to my passion for yourself, all that a man esteems most sacred. Nay, my own beloved one,” he continued, in suddenly softened accents, on

seeing Edith shrink from him with a look of alarm ; “do not fancy, for a moment, that I regret the sacrifice—would that I had far more to give up that I might prove to you the extent, the boundless extent of my devotion. Edith, sweet Edith, I have been dying of my insane love for you.”

“And yet you could coldly counsel another to endeavour to win me, Stuart?”

“It is true, I did so ; but none ever guessed what it cost me, Edith. Did Alick then communicate our conversation to you?”

“Not a word—but I overheard it all. There is a bench on the terrace, just below the room your cousin occupied—the window had been left open, and I was seated on that bench.”

“You overheard it all then, and concluded, doubtlessly, that I could have no love for you myself?”

“It matters not what I concluded. I will tell you though what I did—I offered myself that very day to Alick ; and had

I not done so, I am convinced no engagement would ever have taken place."

"Fool, fool, that I was!" muttered Sir Stuart, his pale face gathering gloom again. "Heaven alone can foresee how all this will end."

"Stuart, your love must be weaker than I deemed it, since you are constantly fearing the consequences of its avowal. For you, however, remember there is yet a possibility of retreat. Take back, if you desire it, your vows to me, and fulfil those you have plighted to another."

"Edith," interrupted her companion, grasping her hand, and raising it to his breast with a wild solemnity that was positively startling, "do not madden me by your cruel words. Feel how my heart is beating; how strong and high and impetuous is its every motion. Then hear me swear, by all I esteem holy, that it is for you, and you alone, it is throbbing thus—that I love you with an intensity no woman could ever understand—that to

pass my life at your side, I would sacrifice everything in earth and Heaven. Edith, my Edith, does this content you ?”

“Forgive me,” she murmured, softly and beseechingly ; “I can never doubt you again—but, Stuart, we must think now a little of the future, and devise some means of extricating ourselves from the difficulties by which we are at present surrounded.”

At the conclusion of a very long and grave discussion, it was agreed that Sir Stuart should return, for some time, to Scotland, and, when there, communicate to Miss Egerton his change of sentiment ; and that Edith should immediately, as the case demanded, write to renounce her engagement with Mr. Boisragon.

In entering into these painful but necessary details, they were both alike struck with a keener sense of the unworthiness and treachery of their conduct than the first tumult of passion had allowed them to be, and it was in low, subdued, and

almost mournful tones that their conference ended, at length, and that they bade each other the first reluctant, tearful farewell.

“We will meet once more, my beloved, before I leave you for many months,” Sir Stuart said, as he bent to kiss the flushed cheek that grew still brighter as his lips approached it. “In this same spot let it be, Edith, that where I have received your first vows, I may receive also your last—your last, ere I claim you for my own, dearest, and our joys and sorrows become mingled for ever.”

A strange shiver crept over Edith as she withdrew her hand from Stuart’s final grasp.

“Surely,” she said, “the night has grown suddenly cold, or conscience is laying her fingers of ice upon my heart. Heaven keep you from evil, Stuart, till we meet again. Let me go now, or I shall be seeing ghosts in every bush and tree.”

Thus half jestingly, half solemnly, she

parted from her lover, and going at almost flying speed, pausing not a second now upon the fatal bridge, only glancing with another cold shudder down into the gently flowing water, she reached home ere her father had awakened from his sleep, and leaving for him a brief message, stole away to the solitude of her own room, with a heavier weight upon her spirits, a more dreary foreboding of the future, than in all her life she had yet experienced.

And during the long, wretched hours of that sleepless night, there rang in her ears, with cruel steadiness, the words of that old song, which had so strangely affected Alick, and which became, at last, to her excited imagination, like a mournful dirge, ever going on, and ever repeating—

“ We shall not meet again, love,
As once we have met.”

CHAPTER X.

A SUMMER EVENING IN DEVONSHIRE.

IN all Devonshire, there was not a sweeter spot than that on which stood the cottage of Mrs. Boisragon. A wilderness of light, graceful trees, extended as far as the eye could reach, on the left, and, on the right, green lanes and meadows separated it from a little village, remarkable for its rural beauty, and from being buried, as it were, in its own fertile valleys from the world and its busy cares.

Such, at least, was the impression often produced on strangers who visited this part of Devonshire, and such, in a tenfold degree, would have been the impression of any one who had come suddenly, on a charming summer evening, upon the party assembled on the tiny lawn, in front of the widow's cottage; for never had human contentment been more strikingly exhibited in the countenances of mortal beings than it was in those of the three who walked now so lovingly side by side, or paused to gaze together at the bright, cloudless sky, or sat on a rustic bench, beneath a purple beech, ever talking low and earnestly, as those talk whose hearts are closely united, and whose every thought is open to the other.

The three were Mrs. Boisragon and her two children—those beloved children, who in their goodness and devotion, had made her life so happy and so blessed; and whom she was now about to consign forever to the arms of strangers—strangers

dearer to them than even she, the tender mother, had been.

But does she not know and feel from the depths of her very heart, that they have both chosen wisely and well? that the objects of their young, ardent affections, possess all the attributes calculated to bring light and joy to their separate homes, that could she, from the wide world, have chosen for her children, her choice would have been the same as theirs. Ah, happy, happy mother! how few there are who can say or feel as much as this.

But we will hear her own sentiments now, and take a closer view of the whole enviable trio, whose words are pleasant words, and whose looks, warm from the heart, give a yet sunnier aspect to that bright and sunny scene.

“Yes, my dear ones,” Mrs. Boisragon was saying, in tones that spoke of such illimitable tenderness—“I can resign you both, almost without a pang, for I feel that instead of losing those I now possess I

shall be gaining two more good and loving children. You, my Nettia, will never, I am well assured, remain long absent from your poor, lonely mother ; and you, Alick, and your sweet wife must often make this humble cottage your home."

" Ah, mother dear," Alick replied, pressing the white, soft hand that was laid in his own, " Your affection for my beautiful Edith has filled to overflowing my cup of happiness. I can never cease to wonder at the exceeding blessedness of the lot that has been appointed for me—I, so every way unworthy—so inferior to that angel of goodness and loveliness."

" You are an enthusiast, my own Alick," said his mother with a smile, " but I can forgive enthusiasm where Edith is concerned. Me also she has bewitched almost as much as you. Nettia alone seems to have escaped this enchantment."

" I *do* love Edith, mamma," Nettia replied quickly, " and I am quite sure that when she is my sister this love will daily

increase. Even now I admire her quite as much, perhaps more than either of you."

"Dear girl," said Alick, turning suddenly to embrace his sister for these words, "I was very certain you could not have been so long with Edith without discovering her worthiness. She has a sincere affection for you too, Nettia, and how could you help returning it?"

"We shall all love each other fondly and sincerely," Mrs. Boisragon said, with earnest feeling, "and I, with my latest breath, shall bless those who have so greatly contributed to the happiness of my darling children."

"Then, mother, your blessings for my Edith should be more deep and fervent than any that were ever uttered; for she has made the whole universe to me one vast paradise of delight. Four days, four long, long days, dear mother, and then—then this weary absence will be ended;

and we shall meet again not only ‘as once we have met,’ but more fondly, more rapturously—with happiness assured and perfect.”

“God grant it!” said Mrs. Boisragon, feelingly; “but has my Nettia no sweet anticipations too?”

That blush, so beautiful and pure, for which Nettia was remarkable, rose to her cheek at this moment; but her only reply was a tender pressure of her mother’s hand, and a slight upturning of her soft and earnest eyes, which gave full assurance to that mother’s anxious heart.

“Heaven has been very bountiful in its mercies to us, my children,” she said, after the pause of a few minutes. “Let it be our care to guard our souls from growing too much wrapped up in these earthly treasures. For you, my Alick, I fear most the sin of idolatry; but, for your wife’s sake, as well as your own, you must, indeed, guard against inordinate and unreasonable affection.”

“Oh! dearest of mothers,” he replied, warmly, “how can any affection be unreasonable that is lavished on an angel? Do not talk to me of moderating my love for Edith. If I had a thousand hearts to give, I should esteem the gift too small to bestow on her.”

“Alick, this is idolatry,” said Nettia, with sudden gravity, “I tremble for your peace, my own dear brother, when I hear you speak so recklessly and unwisely as you are doing now.”

“*Calme toi*, then, sweet sister Anne,” he answered lightly, “for my peace is built upon a foundation that nothing in this world can shake—upon the love of the dearest, truest, and most peerless creature that nature ever formed.”

“Alick, you are raving to-night,” said Mrs. Boisragon, still smiling affectionately, as she took from her son’s shoulder a dead leaf that had just fallen upon it. “See, here is a mute reproof for your too con-

fidant boasting—a withered leaf, falling while all the rest are green.”

“A few weeks ago this would have made me superstitious,” he replied, taking it from his mother’s hand, and throwing it carelessly on the ground, “but my mind has gained strength from happiness; and I can laugh at such foolish omens now.”

Nettia said not a word, but she stooped to pick up the leaf, and glancing at the green tree above them, walked away with a suddenly pallid countenance, and a sensation of oppression at her heart, which was not altogether strange to her of late.

Neither Mrs. Boisragon, nor Alick had remarked her emotion; and about five minutes later, a servant, coming into the garden with letters, put every other thought out of their heads.

“One for you, my Alick,” said the smiling mother, handing over a delicate

envelope with the name of Edith in tiny letters on the almost as tiny seal—"You thought your happiness incapable of increase a few minutes ago ; but your eyes are telling a different tale at present, *caro mio*."

Alick, foolish lover that he was, seized the precious document with trembling hands, and after pressing it to his lips, with the fond devotion a saint might bestow on a relic, he walked a little way apart, and eagerly broke the tiny seal—carefully though, in spite of his haste—for even this he loved, and would have preserved, I verily believe, at the peril of his life.

Mrs. Boisragon, absorbed in a lengthy communication from Miss Eliza Cargill (in which that worthy lady gave a full account of Sir Stuart's illness and recovery) paid no further attention to her son, till she was suddenly aroused by a sound so strange and uncommon, that, starting violently, she turned round, and looked

anxiously towards the spot where Alick was standing.

Had the smiling Heavens above her been changed in one dreadful moment into a blackened scroll, Mrs. Boisragon could scarcely have been more horrified and appalled than she was at the sight that now met her eyes—at the sight of her son, her precious boy, transformed from a picture of radiant happiness into a still image of dull and terrible despair—the young cheek blanched to the hue of death—the lately smiling lips grown white and rigid, the erect and manly figure bowed as by the weight of years.

Poor, poor mother ! The fiery trial is before you—and the gates of Paradise that a few short minutes ago seemed opening to admit you, have suddenly disappeared and given place to the cold, cold waters of the darkest earthly affliction. Poor, poor mother ! whither will you flee for refuge now ?

“ Alick, my child—my boy—my own beloved one—speak to me—tell me what has happened—Give me that cruel letter.”

It was thus that, after a brief, agonizing pause, Mrs. Boisragon gained strength to address her son ; and he, turning abruptly at that tender voice, with a look that no artist could pourtray, no language describe, put the letter silently into his mother's hands, and sat down on the bench beside her.

This was the letter :

“ After a sleepless and, believe me, most miserable night, I have nerved myself, Alick, for the truly painful task of telling you that my sentiments towards yourself have undergone a change, or rather, perhaps, I deceived myself before, when I fancied that I was calculated to promote your happiness by becoming your wife—I

feel now that our proposed union would be productive of nothing but wretchedness to both of us, since without sincere and *mutual* love no marriage can be happy eventually. That this communication of my sentiments, perhaps I ought to say of my faithlessness, will cause you great pain, I cannot doubt, and I am truly miserable in thinking of it—but is it not better, under such unfortunate circumstances, to be perfectly candid if we can be nothing else? There is, too, another thought which weighs very heavily upon me—your mother, Alick, whom I still love so tenderly, will she not hate me, curse me even, for my conduct towards you? I know that I deserve no mercy, no indulgence, and yet the idea of *her* condemnation, of *her* reproaches adds tenfold to my unhappiness. What more can I say, Alick, but that I implore you earnestly to forget me, or to think of me as one unworthy your lightest regret. I *am* unworthy—unworthy even to breathe a prayer for your welfare and happiness,

and yet my heart forms no more fervent wish than that you may speedily recover perfect health and peace of mind—All this, however, will seem but mockery from one who can act as I am acting, and who can frame no excuse for her conduct, beyond the plea of being urged on by impulses over which she has had little or no control.

“EDITH.”

Mrs. Boisragon read this letter to the end, weighing every word, meditating upon every sentence. Then, with a deep red spot on both her cheeks, and an almost savage fire in her usually gentle eyes, she turned slowly round to her son who sat there perfectly still, pale and speechless—a touching picture of suddenly stricken youth—offering no resistance to his fate, receiving it without a struggle, without a murmur.

“Alick,” she said, and her voice had lost all its softness, and was shrill and harsh, “Alick, rouse yourself from this unmanly stupor, and hear your mother curse this peerless creature, this angel, this enchantress, who not satisfied with bewitching us all, is now, about to act the part of a murderess—beginning with those who would have died for her—From the lowest depths of my heart I curse—”

“Mother, mother, forbear!” Alick almost shrieked, as he sprang from the bench, and threw his arms wildly round his startled mother’s neck. “Never, while I live, shall that wicked curse be uttered, or I will call on Heaven to curse me too in a hundred-fold degree. Mother, from the depths of *my* heart, I can still bless her—and she loved *you* better than she loved me!”

The hardness and sternness of Mrs. Boisragon’s countenance suddenly relaxed ; it might be at the touching tones of Alick’s voice, or it might be at the words them-

selves. In either case, the evil spirit had been scared for the time ; and when, a few minutes after, Nettia, unconscious of what had occurred, returned to the garden, she found her mother and brother weeping silently in each other's arms.

CHAPTER XI.

NETTIA.

THE unfortunate letter was lying on the ground—and Nettia, on a sign from her mother, took it up, and read it through without question or comment—only her cheek grew crimson as she read; and when it was done, she too sat down beside Alick, and looked fearfully into his half-hidden face, to learn the extent of the suffering he was enduring. Turning abruptly, he seized her hand, and pressing it warmly, said, in a low tone,

“I understand your sympathy dearest, kindest sister ; but say nothing, I entreat of you. Let us all, henceforth, avoid one subject, one name. Mother, for your sake, I will struggle manfully, only I must be alone for a time.”

Rising, as he spoke, and then bending to kiss them both, he walked slowly, and with head bowed low, into the house. The mother’s heart yearned after her stricken child, but she would not be selfish enough to follow him now ; and Nettia and herself entered eagerly into the discussion of the strange and sudden grief that had come upon them.

To Mrs. Boisragon, it appeared so incomprehensible, so incredible ; her opinion of Edith had been so confirmed—her faith in her truth and goodness was so assured, that she imagined nothing less than a miracle could have wrought in her this cruel fickleness, this apparently unexpected change.

“I loved her too so fondly, I would have

cherished her so tenderly," she said, in describing her feelings, "that even on me, independently of Alick, this blow falls with nearly killing power. Nettia, my first sensation was one of unmingled hatred—and I would have cursed her, had not your poor brother stopped me, before I had time to utter the words. Even now, should Alick's sufferings be prolonged, I dare not answer for myself—for I feel that, within the last hour, my whole nature has undergone a change."

"Mother," Nettia said, in her calm, passionless voice, "we must be patient under this affliction. We must forget or stifle, resolutely, our own feelings, for poor Alick's sake. I know that, on him, the blow has fallen more heavily than at present it appears. You must prepare yourself dear, dear mother—for a long season of trial; but Heaven will give you strength to bear it, if you do not rebel against its decrees by taking vengeance into your own hands. Oh! believe that Edith will have

suffering enough, for that which she has brought on others, without requiring a fellow being's curse to weigh her more completely to the earth. Let us banish her as much as possible from our thoughts ; and think only of our beloved Alick."

" You are right—quite right—my own good and pious girl, and I will strive to do as you suggest. And Nettia, you must write to Stuart enclosing him that dreadful letter. He will come to us at once, I know, and perhaps, take Alick away with him again—for this unhappy occurrence, my love, will, I fear, delay *your* marriage some little time."

No reply.

Nettia had heard every word of her mother's speech, but she still sat silent, grave, and perfectly composed as before.

" My dearest, did you not understand me? I was begging you to write to Stuart that he may come at once to Alick—do it

if you can, to-night, Nettia. There is yet time for the post."

"I think not, dear mama," the daughter replied, speaking slowly and with apparent reluctance; "but, at any rate, let us delay it a day or two. Alick would not see Stuart yet, I am certain; and what other good could he do here?"

"My love!" exclaimed Mrs. Boisragon, in much surprise, turning to look at her daughter; "you are surely not yourself this evening—confused, as well you may be, poor child, by this terrible grief. You cannot mean to say you would derive no comfort yourself from Stuart's presence. He has been ill, too, my dear, very ill. There was a letter from Eliza Cargill, but the other caused me to forget it all."

"Very ill did she say, mama?" enquired Nettia, beginning to lose her unnatural composure now. "And how long has he been well again?"

"Oh! more than a week, dearest—quite

—quite well, your aunt declares. There is not the slightest cause for uneasiness.”

“I am not uneasy about that—but now dearest mama, listen for a few minutes to me.”

Mrs. Boisragon looked once more anxiously and suspiciously into her daughter's face, and the latter, without further hesitation, continued,

“I see, mama, that, in spite of your astonishment at Edith's extraordinary conduct, it has never struck you that there must be a particular cause for it—something more than a girlish fickleness or instability of feeling. Edith is not by nature fickle, or likely to grow tired of one she has truly loved. But, mama, she never did love Alick truly. She liked him, pitied him, and, I doubt not, believed, conscientiously, she could grow to love him at last—but her heart had been won, if I am not greatly mistaken, before she accepted Alick

—and the winner of it was Stuart Bernarde.”

“What do you mean?” (in a quick, excited voice.) “Nettia, are you dreaming, or are you mad?”

“Neither, dearest mother. Look back calmly, to the time when you first joined our party at Fernley, and tell me if you remember nothing that would agree with my suspicions—you do, I see you do; and I was convinced then, that you remarked the strangeness of Stuart’s manner both to me and to Edith. I did my utmost, on that occasion, to remove any suspicions you might have formed, because I hoped and believed it was but the fancy of a moment, and that Stuart’s heart was still my own. Ah, what infinite pains we take to believe that on which our whole life’s happiness depends. I succeeded, mama, in convincing myself, at last, that I had been needlessly alarmed, and that Stuart’s admiration of Edith was only a

natural tribute to her singular and remarkable attractions. Her subsequent engagement to my brother effectually banished my uneasiness, and, at this time, Stuart's affection for me seemed perceptibly to increase. Nevertheless, up to the day of our leaving Fernley, there were moments—brief and rare, it is true, but still most painful when they occurred, in which a sudden word or glance has re-awakened my suspicions of something more than admiration on Sir Stuart's part, and a strong, though resisted passion, on that of Edith. Since we have been here, I have struggled perseveringly against these thoughts, so injurious to them, and to my own peace of mind. But now, dearest mother, remember that it is more than a fortnight since I have had one line from Stuart; reflect on his sudden illness; then recal those passages in Edith's letter, where she dwells so strongly on her unworthiness, and I think you must acknowledge that my suspicions are not altogether wild, and that we shall do well to

.

defer our invitation to Sir Stuart Bernarde's."

"I see it all—all," said Mrs. Boisragon, in a thick and scarcely audible voice; "but, oh Heavenly Father, it is too much. Thy rod is laid too heavily upon me—both—both my children."

And as the last word died away, the poor mother fell fainting on her brave young daughter's bosom.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SISTERS' CONFERENCE.

EDITH had written her explanatory letter to Alick before she had taken any rest, and after delivering it to a servant, with strict injunctions to have it posted immediately, she returned to her room, (giving orders not to be disturbed for breakfast) and throwing herself, flushed and excited, on the bed, soon fell into a profound and dreamless sleep.

It was long past noon when she awoke,

and the first object that met her startled gaze, as she raised herself languidly to look round the room, was her sister Margaret, sitting with a rather anxious expression on her face, by the bed-side.

“My dear Margey, is it really you? when did you return? I am so delighted that you have come back.”

It was thus that Edith, in a hurried, nervous manner, addressed her sister, who replied by a warm embrace, and an assurance that the pleasure of this meeting was entirely mutual.

“But what ails you, my love?” Margaret went on to say. “You are not usually to be found in bed at this hour—and your poor little hands, Edith, are burning with fever. Papa tells me you were quite well yesterday; but he was uneasy at your not going down to breakfast. What do you feel, darling?”

The tenderness of her sister’s manner brought tears of shame to Edith’s eyes, but

brushing them quickly away, she said, indifferently,

“Oh, I am not ill, Margey, only I had a bad night, and this always makes me feel stupid and nervous in the morning. I will get up immediately, and come down, for, of course, I am dying to hear all about your journey.”

“Lie still Edith, I entreat of you,” said Margaret, gently forcing her sister’s head upon the pillow again. “Indeed, my love, you are much better where you are. I will go now, and mix you a cooling draught, and then you shall try to sleep again.”

“Oh, Margey, pray don’t force me to lie here—I am sure I shall not sleep again for a month. I am quite—quite well.”

“But you will take the draught to please me, Edith ; and if you cannot sleep, I will return and sit by your side.”

Margaret rose as she spoke, and Edith offered no opposition to her going.

Left alone, the recollection of all that

had occurred rushed across her mind like a hot wind, oppressing, almost suffocating her with its strength. Edith had often felt herself weak and vain—even frivolous before—but this sensation of guilt—of treachery—of utter unworthiness, was new to her, and she quailed beneath its biting sting. Surely if those who purchase Satan's fruit at so high a cost, sometimes at that of their immortal souls, knew how little gratification there ever is in eating it, they would pause longer, ere they concluded the unholy barter. They would feel, as poor Edith felt now, that all the kingdoms of the earth weigh as nothing in the balance against self-respect, and a conscience free from guile.

But her thoughts were still in the most dismal confusion. She had no notion of what was to be done now, what was to be her next step towards misery—for that only misery could result from her insane conduct, she was, at present, as fully convinced, as if an angel had stood by her

bedside and told her so. That very love' too, for Stuart Bernarde, which had led to all the mischief, seemed now to burn so dimly that it could scarcely be called a flame. What had become of it—whither had it flown? Alas! her heart appeared dead to every sentiment except bitter and unavailing regret for the cruel part she had played. Sick and faint from all these torturing reflections, she had just buried her burning face in the pillows, when Margaret came in again with the cooling draught.

“Now, Edith dear, swallow this, and then we are going to have a long chat. You must have abundance of news for me.”

Edith took the medicine mechanically, but, as she drank it, a sinful wish arose in her mind, that it was intended to kill instead of to cure her—so wretched and despairing did she feel at present, and so certain is one step in error to debase the soul and generate sins undreamt of before.

Margaret sat down and took her sister's

hand, fixing her calm, kind eyes on the half averted face.

“I think you are less feverish than when you first awoke, Edith, so now, if you positively cannot sleep again, let me hear what you have been doing with yourself in my absence. Papa says he has not seen much of you, except at the hour of meals, and, sometimes, a little in the evening.”

“No, no—I mean, it is true;” replied Edith, absently, for she was thinking in what way she could break the intelligence, that must be communicated, to her sister.

“Then how did you amuse yourself on these occasions?” enquired Margaret again, conscious of an uneasiness she could not account for.

“I really don’t remember. Sometimes I did one thing, sometimes another.”

Edith’s heart was now beating so rapidly that she spoke with evident difficulty; but as Margaret kept her eyes steadily fixed on her face, she was obliged to continue—

“I believe I walked a good deal—it was

such beautiful weather—and I read two or three of the new books—and I began a purse for papa—”

“Did you ever go to make ducks and drakes upon the bridge, Edith?” interrupted Margaret, with a penetrating look.

“No, not to make ducks and drakes; but I went there, sometimes, of course—I mean, there really are so few pretty walks, except in that direction.”

“Yet you used to say, Edith, that you could fancy the heather dell a passage to the caves of eternal despair, or something of that sort—did you not?”

Edith absolutely shuddered as she reflected how near the truth these thoughtless words had proved.

“Perhaps, I was not so very wrong,” she replied, beginning to feel reckless of all but her own self-contempt. “At any rate, it has brought nothing but despair and wretchedness to me.”

“How do you mean—what have you done?” said Margaret, growing paler, as

she saw her sister's agitation every moment increase

Edith withdrew the hand that her companion had held till now, and raising herself on one arm, she began, with desperate resolution, her tale of vanity and weakness.

Margaret heard her in silence to the end, though the emotions of her own upright and affectionate heart were almost choking her, as she listened. But when Edith ceased speaking, and looked imploringly into her sister's eyes for some token of pity and forgiveness, she said only, in a voice that, for her, seemed icy cold,

"And what now do you propose to do?"

"Oh, Margey," cried Edith, covering her face, and bursting into passionate tears, "I cannot bear this from you. If *you* forsake, and look coldly upon me, then I am lost indeed."

"You have still Sir Stuart Bernarde," Margaret answered, chillingly; but the

next moment she had clasped her arms tightly round the neck of her unhappy sister, accusing herself bitterly for the first and last severe sentence her lips were ever known to utter.

“Margaret, I deserve your contempt, your detestation—but you are good and strong and wise. Advise me, act for me, I implore you, for my brain is in utter and fearful confusion.”

“Edith, you must be calm now, and not only think but act also for yourself—I will not forsake you, nor could I long look coldly upon you—you, Edith, who have been more like a darling and only child than a sister to me. But I will not hide from you that your conduct has planted sharper daggers in my heart than any other earthly trial could have done. Had I guessed this, I would have died sooner than have left you exposed to temptation. Oh, Edith, my poor girl, I tremble to think of the mischief you may have caused.”

“You mean about Alick, I know—but,

what could I have done? would it have been right, could *you* have advised me to go to the altar with a lie on my lips—to swear to love one man, believing my whole heart to be another's?"

"No, Edith, I should not have advised that; but how could you so far have deceived yourself before? To me, I confess, your whole conduct and feelings are inexplicable. I want a key to them. They puzzle me beyond measure. Do you understand them perfectly yourself?"

"At the present moment, I certainly do not; but then my mind is all in excitement and disorder. I am conscious only of intense wretchedness, and a wish to undo all the occurrences of the last week."

"Only of the last week, Edith?"

"No—of the last three months, before any of these strangers came to disturb our peace, Margey. Oh! why—why did I ever sigh for change?"

"Vain lamentations will avail nothing now, Edith. Let us calmly and dispassion-

ately consider your unhappy position, and decide on what is to be done. You are of course quite certain about your attachment to Sir Stuart Bernarde?"

Edith's face became in an instant glow, and she turned half-reproachfully to her sister ; but Margaret paid no attention to this, continuing in the attitude of one who waits for an answer. At length, very slowly and reluctantly it came.

"I am certain about nothing just now, Margaret, except that I am unutterably miserable—for which, I see, you have no compassion—but, at the risk of increasing your contempt, I will admit that Sir Stuart appears to me in a totally different light since my respect for him is lessened. This is wretched inconsistency I know, but I cannot help it—and weak as I am myself, I do not feel sufficient indulgence for his weakness. As the lover of another—as an object unattainable to me, I could have sacrificed everything to gain his love—had he remained firm I should have worshipped him as a superior being;

but he has come down from his pedestal—and though I still love him, it is quite an altered feeling.”

“Then what, Edith, do you imagine he can think of you?”

“I have never asked myself the question—my own sentiments have occupied me more than his.”

“But let me understand you distinctly. Supposing every impediment removed—and you could, with honour and delicacy, accept Sir Stuart for a husband, would you do so?”

Edith hesitated for a few minutes. Then, instead of answering this question, she said, with much embarrassment,

“I am, at present, engaged to him, Margaret.”

“You intend then, to complete the creditable work you have begun? My dear Edith, if I seem to speak harshly, it is because you puzzle me so entirely. I had understood from your apparent unhappiness, that you repented the steps already taken, and were willing, if possible, to re-

trace them. How am I to reconcile this with your present assertion of an engagement with Miss Egerton's promised husband?"

"Margaret, you do, indeed, speak bitterly—but I have no right to complain. Have patience yet a few moments longer, and I will try to make you understand me. I wish now, to do what is just—as far as I have left it in my power. If my judgment is wrong, you must correct it. Will you listen?"

"Most attentively, Edith. Pray, go on!"

"Well, then, I would suggest your seeing Sir Stuart before his departure, and telling him, from me, that he is released from his last engagement—that I pray him, for his own happiness and self-respect, to restore Miss Egerton to her former place in his heart. Tell him, that I am convinced we should never know real peace of mind if our consciences were burdened with the tears of others. Urge all you can, Marga-

ret, to make him forget the madness of the last few hours ; and if you succeed, I will swear never to see him again. I will do all that you advise."

"And if I do not succeed, Edith?"

"If you do not succeed, Margaret—if, in spite of your persuasions, your entreaties and your statement of Miss Egerton's claims—Stuart still persists in exacting *my* promise, still declares that on me his happiness depends, then my judgment tells me that I shall have no right to refuse the fulfilment of vows that were certainly made with the fullest concurrence of my heart and reason. But what do you think, Margaret?"

"I was thinking, Edith, that some other vows were made with the concurrence of your heart and reason—that on you, the happiness of another than Stuart Bernarde depends ; and that this other, has a far better right to exact the fulfilment of your promises."

"But you know he will not do it, Mar-

garet. Even if I desired now, with my whole soul, to become bound to Alick again, he would not, after my letter, accept the love that I could offer."

"Nor would I recommend him to do so, Edith. Your love for him, at best, was but a cold and worthless gift. I never did, in my heart, approve that engagement; but it had gone too far to be broken off—with honour."

"I understand, Margaret," said Edith, bitterly, "I am, henceforth, to be a warning and a reproach to my sex—but this I must endure, as a just punishment for my sins. Tell me, however, what you think I ought to do with regard to Sir Stuart."

"I cannot advise you, Edith, until I have had an interview with him; but thus far I agree with you—that if there is a possibility of restoring him to Miss Egerton, it ought to be done—You have not reflected, I am perfectly sure, Edith, that you are depriving your friend of a splendid position as well as of a lover—Sir Stuart

Bernarde is very wealthy, and to a family who have had such struggles to endure as the Boisragons have, this connection, even in a worldly point of view, is of considerable importance. I will not urge upon your consideration the opinion that society in general would form of your conduct, because a woman who acts as you have acted, of course makes up her mind to set society at defiance—but I hope I am right in believing that you had neither reflected on, nor can now be indifferent to the injuries you would be inflicting on a most amiable and hitherto struggling family.”

Edith had listened to her sister at first in surprise, and then in great excitement, which threatened to break forth ere Margaret had finished speaking. When she ceased, burning tears and vehement words came with torrent-like impetuosity, spurning all restraint, and leaving no doubt of the sincerity of the feeling they expressed.

“Margaret, dear Margaret, will you

believe me when I swear to you, by all I hold sacred, that I had not given these things a single thought—oh, you will not believe that I could have been so blind, so stupid, so mad as not to remember them—Gracious powers what a wretch indeed I have been, and well might you ask what Stuart could think of me—but no, no, surely no living man could suspect a woman of such baseness, such infinite littleness and selfishness—Margaret, my eyes are opened now, but I must see Sir Stuart myself, I must explain to him—I must implore him, on my knees, to return to Nettia. I must have justice done, or I shall die of self-contempt—I shall never dare show my face amongst my fellow beings again.”

Covering this burning face with her almost as burning hands, Edith rocked herself passionately to and fro, murmuring in low and broken tones—

“*Mia madre, mia madre*—what will you think of me?”

Margaret saw that she had done enough

to excite her sisters noblest feelings—that these would drown the unholy voice of passion for awhile; and now she exerted herself to soothe the wayward creature whom in spite of all her faults—faults never before so glaringly revealed—she loved with the deepest and most protecting tenderness.

“ Dear Edith, I do indeed believe every word of your assertion, and I am as fully convinced that Sir Stuart never once suspected you of any worldly feeling. If you have the least confidence in my advice you will not attempt to see him again at present. Trust me with all your explanations, and we will yet hope for the best. I must leave you now as I have much business to talk over with papa. I will also break to him the change in your prospects, and give orders for the wedding preparations to be stopped—Is there any other thing I can do for you?”

“ Kiss me, Margey, before you go,” said Edith, in the saddest, humblest tone; and

Margaret, with fast falling tears, pressed her lips fondly on the flushed cheek and throbbing brow, and with a scarcely audible "God bless you!" left her truly wretched and repentant sister to the purgatory of her own self-reproaching thoughts.

Weep, weep, daughter of Eve! for weeping is the dew of repentance; but very bitter must ever be those tears which come, like yours, too late to save, which instead of bracing up the failing strength prove only the utter weakness of frail humanity.

"We barter life for pottage, sell true bliss
For wealth or power, for honour or renown;
Then, Esau-like, our Father's blessing miss,
And wash with fruitless tears our faded crown."

CHAPTER XIII.

ANOTHER FORBIDDEN MEETING.

BUT the time Edith allowed herself for weeping now, was short, as she had other work to do—work that demanded all her courage, all her strength, and a far greater degree of resolution than she had ever before been called upon to exercise.

She had asked her sister's advice, she had much respect for her opinion, but in this case she felt that her own judgment was entitled to a voice, and it was to this

voice she listened, in making up her mind to go at once and alone, to Sir Stuart Bernarde.

Dressing hastily, she walked to the window, and found, on drawing aside the curtain, that it was raining in torrents, and that the grey, clouded sky, offered no hope of the slightest improvement in the weather during the day.

“It is unfortunate,” said Edith, to herself, “as it will considerably impede my progress ; but go I must and will, before another sun has set.”

Equipping herself, therefore, in haste, and without a word to any one, she stole down the back staircase, and through a gate in the shrubberies, got out, unseen, into the road leading to the glen.

Half an hour's rapid walking brought her to the bridge, and scarcely noticing the swollen brook, or the numerous little torrents issuing from it, which were beginning, in many parts, to overflow the valley, Edith went on at ever increasing

speed, intent only on the prompt accomplishment of her purpose.

It was a long and tedious walk at all times, and to a person less active than Edith it would have been one of considerable difficulty and danger now ; but she sprang lightly across the swelling rivulets, avoided the lowest paths, and, at length, half fainting from fatigue and exhaustion, sustained only by the excitement of her feelings, reached Sir Stuart's dwelling, and was conducted by the astonished servant into the presence of the baronet himself. The man, though dying of curiosity, was discreet enough to close the door, and the lately plighted lovers stood face to face, and alone. Sir Stuart was the first to speak?"

"Edith, am I in a dream, or is it really yourself I see?"

He came nearer to her as he said these words, and would have taken her into his arms—but, with a gesture of command, she motioned him away, and entirely mysti-

fied now, he waited anxiously for some explanation. It was quickly given.

“Stuart, it was not for the gratification of my affection that I have braved the elements to visit you to-day—It was to tell you that my eyes have become opened to the enormity of my conduct, and that I can never know rest or peace till you promise me to do justice to Nettia. I thought of nothing—I remembered nothing yesterday, but that we loved each other, and were still free by the laws of man. To-day I have been reminded of all that Miss Egerton and her family would lose, in losing you, and bad as I have been—as I am—I would sooner die than possess myself of advantages to which they have every claim, and which, to me, would be utterly valueless. Oh, Stuart, although you must, in your heart, despise me—acquit me, at least, of base and mercenary motives in accepting your offered love. I swear to you—”

Stuart almost impatiently interrupted her.

“Edith, for Heaven’s sake, do more justice to me and to yourself. Am I a fool, that I should suspect a heart like yours of selfish or interested motives—and am I a brute, that I should forget the position of the family whom I am about to injure. Be at peace, Edith, for this very hour I have despatched instructions to my lawyer, by which the half of my fortune becomes transferred to my cousins — Antoinette Egerton, and Alick Boisragon—not as a reparation for the unhappiness I fear I am occasioning both, but as an act of common justice. Are you satisfied now?”

“Of your generosity and thoughtfulness, quite, Stuart ; but my mind was made up before I came from home this morning, to refuse the sacrifices you are willing, I believe, to make for me. Nettia would not—could not accept your money. Alick would sooner perish, if I know him at all—

and Mrs. Boisragon would regard the offer as an insult greater than your rejection of her daughter's hand. Stuart, there is but one way of doing right, and this is to forget your temporary infidelity—to forget the wretched being who tempted you into it—and to restore to Nettia the heart of which I so cruelly robbed her.”

Sir Stuart smiled in unutterable scorn as he replied,

“I have yet to learn the process by which this rapid transposing of human hearts is to be accomplished. As I conclude you have returned yours since last night to its first owner, perhaps you can give me a lesson in the art ?”

When once the golden barrier of respect has been broken down, how rapidly, even with the fondest lovers, bitter words will rush in, bringing doubt, suspicion, and all unkind feelings in their train. But in this case, suspicion was unfounded ; and Edith, justly aggrieved, replied proudly,

“ You do me cruel wrong, Sir Stuart

Bernarde. My letter, renouncing Mr. Boisragon, was dispatched by the earliest post this morning. I have no right to reproach you for the unkindness of your words ; but tell me, at least, what I am to understand by them ?”

“ This,” said Sir Stuart, firmly. “ That I would not insult my cousin by offering her a hand with no heart to accompany it—that, come what will, I shall stoop to no deception—that my love for you, Edith (here his voice and look softened perceptibly), is not the passing fancy of a moment, but the one passion of a lifetime ; and that, if you will, hereafter, fulfil the vows you made last night, I shall esteem myself more than repaid for any present sufferings which the fear of giving pain to others may occasion me. Now, will you look kindly upon me again, and let me order you a room and a fire, and send for some dry garments to replace those dripping ones?”

“ I never take cold,” Edith replied, carelessly ; “ and, indeed, I shall esteem my life

of little value, if you persist in what you have now asserted. Do not let us talk of love. I fancy I have proved that I had some small share of regard for you ; but this is not now the question. The question is, what is right and just."

"Edith, you are already shivering with cold, and your face flushed with fever—do not let me have your death to answer for—I insist, as your future husband, that you suffer me to send for some dry clothes and order a carriage to take you home !"

"You do well, Sir Stuart, to remind me of the equivocal position in which I have placed myself, by coming unattended beneath your roof—but, as your plan of sending for clothes and a carriage, would only make matters worse, by rendering them public, I shall immediately return as I came. Let me not have the misery of thinking that my errand has been a fruitless one. Oh ! Stuart, if you, indeed, love me,

prove it now, by doing what I implore of you !”

She clasped her hands wildly, and more and more earnest became her prayers that he would forget her and fulfill his first engagement. It was no wonder that Sir Stuart feared for her reason, as he listened to those passionate, and, at length, despairing words, inspired by the too late repentance of a highly sensitive and excitable nature. He became anxious that the scene should terminate, more for her sake than for his own. Monsieur de la Tour, who had been absent all the morning, might return and find her there.

“ Edith, be calm, and I will think of all you have been urging when I am alone. If you will not have a carriage, let me, at least, walk home with you now—for, indeed, you will be very ill, remaining so long in those damp clothes. Dearest Edith, listen for this once to me.”

“ Yes ; I will go,” said Edith, “ but it

must be as I came, alone. The rain has ceased, and my feet will carry me swiftly along the glen. I *will* have my own way, Sir Stuart ; so good-bye, now, and for ever !”

Seeing the state of excitement she was in, Stuart ventured no further opposition, though he determined to follow her at a short distance, till she had arrived safely at home. Feigning, therefore, to receive her adieux as she wished him, he allowed her to set out first ; and, in a few minutes, was following as fast and closely as caution, and his less active feet, would allow.

It was very fortunate for Edith that there was a protector at hand, or she might otherwise, have breathed her last in the glen that had already proved so fatal to her. Although the rain had ceased—the brooks and rivulets had become much more swollen than when she had passed them before, and added to this, the fatigue and excitement she had undergone prevented the caution she had exercised in coming, so

that her footing frequently gave way, and she became immersed above her ankles in water. This soon completely exhausted the little strength she had remaining ; and about half-way up the glen, a sudden faintness and numbness came over her, and she fell on a mound of grass and heather, pale, senseless—and, to all appearance, dead.

Then it was, that Stuart came to her rescue, and blessing the caution that had led him to follow her footsteps, took up the slight, unconscious figure in his arms, and bore her, quickly and easily, the remaining part of the way—anxiety for her safety lending a speed and strength to his limbs, that they had seldom known before.

In delivering her into the arms of her alarmed and astonished sister, Sir Stuart addressed to the latter the following brief, but, to Margaret, satisfactory sentence—

“I will not stay to see her when she recovers, but tell her from me that my only wish is to do what is just and right—that

I shall return immediately to Scotland, and remain there some months. Assure your sister, Miss Lascelles, that I leave her free, and that her will shall be mine."

Without another word, without even the common civilities of leave-taking, the proud man turned away, and pursued his lonely walk through the damp glen with feelings that the most miserable need not have envied.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN AUTUMN EVENING IN DEVONSHIRE.

On a chill, bleak evening in October, when the rain was pattering dismally without, and a blustering northern wind was driving the withered leaves against the streaming window-panes, the same little party sat together in the parlour of Mrs. Boisragon's cottage, to whom I introduced you upon a sweet July evening, as they strolled on the sunny lawn.

Their aspect and their occupations were

somewhat different now. Mrs. Boisragon, grave almost to sternness, sat on one side of the fire-place, working with apparent diligence, though her eyes were often raised to contemplate her children, who sat close together on the opposite side,—Alick in a large, easy chair, a regular invalid concern, drawn almost into the blazing fire, and Nettia on a low stool at his feet. They were both changed, but in the brother this change was more especially apparent; for not only was physical suffering visibly and painfully stamped upon his features, but he had lost nearly all appearance of youth, and might, by a stranger at a first glance, have been taken for a man in middle age, on whom death had set his seal.

Nettia was considerably thinner, and there was no trace of colour on her fair, smooth cheek; but her face was calm and patient still, and the expression of goodness for which it had always been remarkable, beamed there yet, and in a more confirmed and unmistakeable degree. She had passed

through the fire and come forth purified, and in exchange for this world's rarest happiness, she had received gifts from angels, and was striving therewith to be content. Her brother regarded her almost as a being from another world, a ministering spirit sent to cheer his last hours on earth, for from the moment when the blow fell upon him, Nettia, with a heroism peculiar to those whom Heaven selects for chastening, had devoted herself to the task of binding up his wounds, of whispering courage and consolation to his sinking spirit, without once remembering, or seeming to remember that she too had been struck down by the same cruel stroke.

Alick had struggled bravely for awhile, but it was only for his mother's sake, that she might see it was not the will, but the power which he lacked to rally. For himself he felt, from the first, that all resistance would be useless—that the arrow was a deadly one, whose poison entered, day by day, more deeply into his quivering flesh.

It was most sad and touching to see how meekly he bent to his fate, how uncomplainingly that once joyous spirit accepted the bitter cup, and bowed itself to the will of Heaven. Nettia's whole aim had been to give strength and fortitude to his mind, to inspire him with a determination to resist despair. She thought he might recover, if the will to do so was sufficiently strong, but it was the want of this firm will which she feared, which she had always feared for her brother. And she was right. Alick in his secret heart wished to die and be at rest. He could not summon sufficient energy to contemplate life without Edith. What was life? he asked himself. Since he had loved, it had been a world where one bright star shone ever down upon him gloriously, giving to his heart, light, warmth, and unutterable happiness—Before he knew Edith, it had been a wide and boundless universe, wherein he was seeking for this star.

Now he had lost it again for ever, and

what, he thought, could be more natural, than that he should lie down, like a tired child, and sleep on the green earth's breast.

Neither his mother nor sister guessed how far his disease had extended, and the latter was still using every effort to rouse his mind from the lethargy she so much dreaded, and to give him a renewed interest in life.

She held now in her hand a small book from which she every now and then selected passages to read aloud, and her brother, appreciating the kindness of her motives, often feigned a pleasure and an interest, he very rarely felt in any subject now.

“Listen, Alick, dear, I have found something that I am quite sure you will admire.

“Within my breast there is no light,
But the cold light of stars,
I give the first watch of the night
To the red planet Mars.

“ The star of the unconquered will
He rises in my breast,
Serene and resolute and still,
And calm, and self-possessed.

“ And thou too whosoe’r thou art
That readest this brief psalm,
As one by one thy hopes depart,
Be resolute and calm.

“ O fear not, in a world like this,
And thou shalt know ere long,
Know how sublime a thing it is
To suffer and be strong.”

“ It is beautiful indeed,” said poor Alick,
“ and you at least, Nettia, have proved its
truth. From my very heart I admire your
courage and resolution, but I cannot imi-
tate it. I can suffer and be *still*, but it is
reserved for those who, like yourself, have
fought with human nature and conquered
it, to suffer and be *strong*.”

“ You have both, my dear ones,” said
the mother, looking with deep and mourn-

ful tenderness upon them, “you have both done the best according to your separate abilities. I give my Nettia all the praise her brave and noble conduct deserves, but it would be unjust to deny to Alick that commendation which is due to every earnest effort, whether successful or otherwise.”

“It will, it shall be successful yet,” cried Nettia, seizing her brother’s hand, and gazing up beseechingly into his melancholy face, “dearest, dearest Alick, say you will not allow yourself to be conquered by a mere earthly grief. Resolve to be strong, and you will be. Look steadily, courageously at this dark phantom that pursues you—and it will vanish.”

“It will vanish soon;” replied Alick, in a low voice that only his sister could hear. Then he said aloud—“Mother dear, how long is it since you have heard from the Cargills?”

Mrs. Boisragon started and looked anxiously at her son. This was the first time he had made any direct enquiry concerning

Fernley ; and though he would constantly allude to his disappointment, as an affliction against which he had to struggle, as a grief which the Hand of Heaven had laid upon him, he had never once, since the first evening, named Edith's name, or asked a single question concerning her, though he knew that his mother received frequent communications from their relatives at Fernley, and would have given him any information he desired to have.

Seeing her surprise he repeated the question, adding with a calm look and tone—

“ I wish to hear all now, dearest mother. It will do me good—Is she married yet?”

Alick felt his sister's hand tremble as he put this question, but she looked up and smiled upon him, while Mrs. Boisragon replied—

“ No, Alick ; there seems to have been no question of this at present. She has been ill, dangerously ill, and our cousins tell me that they scarcely recognized her the first time she came to church after her

recovery. I believe now, however, she is getting strong again."

Poor Alick's rapidly changing colour attested the deep interest he felt in this intelligence; but he made no comment on it, and after the pause of a few minutes he said (gently pressing his sister's hand, as if to ask for pardon.) "And Stuart Bernarde, mother—what do they say of him?"

"Nothing, dearest; they know nothing, except that he went to Scotland at the beginning of August."

"But you must know more than this, mother; he must have written to you or Nettia, explaining the cause of his absence. Hitherto I have remained satisfied with your assertion that my sister's engagement was at an end, because I guessed too much to trust myself with the subject. But now I am prepared to hear all—it is my earnest wish to be fully enlightened on every point."

"My love, I will conceal nothing that I know. Sir Stuart, in my opinion, is much

less reprehensible than—than those by whom he was tempted into conduct at which I am convinced his proud and honourable nature must revolt. Of course we are totally unacquainted with the position in which the parties now stand towards each other. That they did meet, and this more than once, we know from a letter without signature or date, but written, there can be no doubt, by that Frenchman, who was staying at the lodge, and who was, I now remember perfectly, an object of peculiar detestation to E—, to Miss Lascelles. There must, I imagine, have been some enmity between them, and he, with the vindictiveness common to deformed persons, has sought to revenge himself in this unworthy manner. But with him and his quarrels we have nothing now to do. Miss Lascelles is fully competent to take her own part, and if she ever feels that he has injured her, I have no doubt she will find means of paying him back with interest.”

“Mother, she loved you well—she would never speak thus of you—”

“Forgive me, Alick—I forget myself when that name is mentioned. Ah! my son, you cannot judge of a mother’s feelings, you can form no idea of the struggle there is to refrain, when I look at you, from angry and bitter words—from—”

“Dear, dear mother, I make every allowance, I thank you for your forbearance; but do not speak of that at present. You were to tell me about Stuart.”

Mrs. Boisragon sighed deeply and continued—

“He wrote to your sister soon after his return to Scotland. He told her his feelings had changed, and that he knew she would scorn to accept him without the love he had once so sincerely felt and offered. He made no allusion to any other attachment, but mentioned his intention of remaining some months in Scotland, and then in all probability going abroad. This was

the substance of his letter, but about a month later a communication arrived from his lawyer, by which we learnt that he had made over to you and to your sister exactly one half of his fortune, to be divided equally between you."

"Mother, you surely did not—"

And Alick's pale face became of a bright crimson hue as he half raised himself from his chair in the excitement of the moment.

"Be calm, dearest," interrupted Mrs. Boisragon, eagerly, "I did nothing that you could disapprove. I wrote first to the lawyer telling him we positively refused the gift, and then to Sir Stuart with the same assurance, even more strongly and peremptorily worded. Since that I have heard nothing from either of them, so I conclude the matter is considered at an end."

"You would sooner starve, mother, than touch one penny of this money," said Alick, with great excitement.

"We all would," was the reply.

“And now one more question, mother, and then we will speak no more of this to-night. Have you or Nettia had any direct communication from any one at the Manor?”

“Yes, Margaret wrote once to your sister, most kindly, most feelingly, to enquire concerning you, but she made no allusion to the past and mentioned no name except yours and mine.”

Alick appeared quite satisfied now, for he made no further enquiries, and his mother and sister even fancied there was a quieter and more peaceful expression on his countenance than there had been before.

At a later hour of the evening, he got up from his chair, and walked slowly about the room, examining every simple object, which had been familiar to him from childhood, with a strange and affecting interest that appeared incomprehensible to those who had so long watched his indifference to all external things.

Finally he went to the window, and drawing aside the heavy curtains, looked out wistfully into the darkness—looked, till his eye having grown accustomed to it, he could dimly discern the little lawn with its purple beeches, and its rustic seats, and the sodden grass now thickly strewn with the dead, autumnal leaves.

Turning away, at last, he went to his mother, and kissed her through the tears that were raining from her eyes—but he only said, as if in continuation of some thought of his own, rather than with a purpose of comforting her,

“It was a happy home, dear mother, and the sun will shine upon it brightly again some day.”

Mrs. Boisragon strained her son passionately to her aching heart; but she could not speak. And, soon after, they all separated for the night.

Poor Alick's secret prognostications had been correct. He rose from his bed no

more, and the wretched mother was obliged, at last, to open her mental eyes to the terrible contemplation of a dying child.

Here, indeed, was a trial for her faith and patience, a trial, too, for that charity which beareth all things, hopeth all things, believeth all things—which *thinketh no evil*. Alas ! I fear, that had Mrs. Boisragon been tried now by the law which killeth, the judgment would have gone sorely against her, for how could she avoid thinking *all* evil, anathematizing in her heart of hearts, the cruel author of this desolating woe, the murderess of her idolized and only son !

It is very difficult, almost impossible, for human nature, in its own strength, to receive affliction as a trial sent direct from Heaven in mercy to our souls. If we could do this, it would be comparatively well with us—we should be content as Alick was, “to suffer and be still.” But we look

about us for the visible, though secondary cause, and on this we vent, without restraint, those emotions of anger and impatience which would be hushed to stillness could we believe the rod was held by an Almighty hand.

Mrs. Boistragon rarely trusted herself to speak of Edith even to her daughter ; but Alick guessed his mother's feelings, and it was with much embarrassment and hesitation that he, at length, summoned courage to open to her a subject which had been on his mind for long.

It was about a fortnight after he had taken entirely to his bed, and the doctor, who came daily, had pronounced him a trifle better than on his last visit. This, by giving a gleam of hope to the poor mother's heart, had considerably softened her usual manner, and Alick seized eagerly the favourable moment.

She was sitting on a chair drawn close to his bed, and her arm supported his

back, while their hands were locked tightly together.

“Dearest mother,” he began, timidly, and raising his large pleading eyes to her attentive face, “If I had set my heart on anything that you knew would give me comfort and satisfaction, almost happiness, mother—would you oppose my striving for it, even if your own feelings and judgment were against it?”

“My beloved—how can you ask? what is there I would oppose that could bring one fraction of pleasure to you?”

“Not many things, I am well assured, dearest and kindest mother. But this, I fear, to which I am now alluding, would be an especial trial to you. Could you—would you receive Edith beneath your roof, if she consented to come?”

Mrs. Boisragon started violently, and a deadly paleness came over all her face. She had evidently been quite unprepared for this; and her voice betokened the agi-

tation of her mind, as she answered, nervously—

“What do you mean, Alick? I do not clearly understand your request—what do you propose—what do you wish?”

“To look upon her once again in life, mother, to assure her of my entire forgiveness, to bid her a last farewell—to comfort her if she needs comfort. Ah, mother, you cannot suppose that she is happy now.”

“For the honour of human nature, I hope not,” Mrs. Boisragon replied, with energy. “But, my Alick, you have, indeed, taken me by surprise. I cannot comprehend your feelings in this matter.”

“Because you did not know, no living being ever *could* know how deeply and intensely I loved her, and still love her, mother, in spite of all. Oh, if I could make you comprehend the yearning, the passionate and ever increasing longing I have to hold her in these dying arms once more,

you would pity me, and grant my request."

"She would not come, Alick?"

"Oh, mother, she would—I feel in my inmost heart that she would. You judge her too hardly."

"Well, Alick, as far as I am concerned, your request is granted. I will receive her if she comes."

"Mother, how can I thank you—dear—dear mother, you have given me new life. We *shall* meet again then. She will see and know how I have loved her. Death itself will scarcely be bitter now. Mother, when will you write?"

"To-day, this very hour, if you please, dearest. Ah, Alick, how can you expect me to forgive one who has changed all our blessings into the bitterest sorrows—one who could have thrown the brightest sunshine around your path, but who has chosen, instead, to cover it with the blackest shadows."

“Mother, for my sake, you will, you must forgive her. But now let the letter be written—kindly, gently written, but earnestly, or she may hesitate to come. Bless you, my own mother, for all your goodness. I am tired now, and I should like to be alone.”

CHAPTER XV.

A WINTER JOURNEY.

THE month of November had set in, as it generally does in England, damp, cold, and foggy, and it was on one of its darkest and most dismal days that Edith Lascelles, attended only by an old servant, commenced her journey to Devonshire. Margaret saw her depart thus with the greatest reluctance; but she could not accompany her, on account of their father's health, which was now rapidly failing. Mr. Simeon

Cargill had offered himself, as an escort, but Edith, with grateful acknowledgments, declined his attendance, feeling far too miserable and heartbroken to endure companionship of any kind—knowing, too, that by all the good old people at the cottage, she was regarded as a person to be shunned and dreaded; a warning to the pure and innocent of her own sex, and a dangerous temptation to the unwary ones of the other. And though Mr. Simeon was justly considered, by his sisters, to be beyond the pale of those temptations to which youthful blood is subject, they breathed much more freely when Edith's decision was made known to them.

The prospect of travelling alone in the month of November, during three days and nights, (for the railroads had not yet extended to remote country places) would, under any circumstances, have been sufficiently depressing to the spirits, and to Edith it was terrible indeed, going, as she knew she was, to the death-bed of one

whose life had, at least, been shortened through her means. But the possibility of refusing this dying summons had never once occurred to her—she regarded it as a just punishment for her sins, and, in the present state of her mind, she would have shrunk from no penance, however trying and severe.

To gaze through scalding, blinding tears at drifting snow storms—or pouring rains—or the dull, leaden, foggy atmosphere, while recollections of the past rose like grim phantoms before her—such was Edith's occupation during those three wretched days; and during the nights, worn out with fatigue and misery, she slept, though only to be tormented with bitter dreams, and to awake languid, feverish, and unrefreshed.

There is scarcely, I think, any time, when thought and memory exercise so much power over us, as during the season of travelling. We are necessarily so still—so completely deprived of our usual resources,

that where there is any mind at all, it must awake into more than ordinary activity. And when conscience has been aggrieved—when the heart is forced to bear witness against itself, the mission of this unwelcome memory is to torture almost to madness.

Edith looked back upon her past life—the nineteen years that had been as a long day of grace to her—and was forced to admit that it had been all vanity and vexation of spirit—time misspent—privileges abused—inclinations, however wrong, indulged—and self alone, in every way, considered. What, too, had become of all those fair dreams of life, which had stood hitherto as brilliant beacons in her flower-decked path? Were these, indeed, gone for ever and ever? was existence henceforth to be a dull routine of joyless duties—a state of forced endurance, from which nothing but death could set her free.

It seemed like it. For what had she to

live for? whose happiness could she now promote?—whose affection could she now hope to gain. Even that tender sister, who had borne with her so long and patiently, could not always quite conceal the disgust her conduct had inspired. Her father was sinking rapidly into the grave, and his eldest daughter, with her untiring devotion, sufficed to fill his heart at present. Remoter friends, to whom she had once been dear, shrank from her now, almost as from some unholy thing.

And he, for whom she had braved and sacrificed all else—how was it with him?

As Edith asked herself this question, she took from her bag a letter, and slowly, sadly, tearfully read it to the end. It was from Sir Stuart Bernarde, and written soon after his return to Scotland, offering her, once more, the hand and heart she had both accepted and rejected nearly at the same time. The style of this letter was grave, earnest, and sincere; but Edith fancied

(and she was right) that it lacked that tone of passionate feeling—that warmth and tenderness which had so strikingly marked his manner when they were together. “Even he,” she had said on first reading it —“even he begins to feel coldly towards me—to despise the weak woman who showed so little respect for herself.”

This had been Edith’s first impression, and every subsequent perusal of the letter confirmed more fully her opinion, and made her rejoice on the prompt and decided refusal she had sent him; and to which there came no reply—no ‘last appeal,’ so flattering to a woman’s heart, even when it is made in vain.

“This dream then is ended for ever,” she thought, as she replaced the letter whence she had taken it, “and I have sacrificed mankind’s, and my own esteem for a shadow—a thing without form or substance—the passing fancy of an hour. Looking back is both torment and folly

now. I must look forwards—steadily forwards—*And to what ?*”

It was the solution of this last question which occupied Edith’s mind so entirely as her journey drew to its termination. A thousand times—and yet a thousand more—she had pictured the meeting between herself and Alick. She had imagined his altered appearance—his altered voice; she had a clear vision of the chamber of sickness—the dim light—the hushed tones—the perfume of hot-house flowers (gifts from pitying friends)—and the soft, cautious footsteps of those who approached the bed. All these things were plain and distinct to her; as plain as poor Alick’s touching tenderness—his whispered words of affection and forgiveness—and Nettia’s pale, good, and unrebuking face.

But there was one thing which imagination failed to picture—one thing which she would have given worlds to see clearly—and this was the meeting between Mrs.

Boisragon and herself. The passionately loving mother standing face to face with the destroyer of her child.

Would it be a dumb scene of unutterable anguish, or brief, passionate and full of bitter words? Would the injured mother meet her with flashing eyes, and lips breathing the curses she so well deserved, or would she be sitting in heart-broken stillness, subdued and pitying like her son? Would the deeply repentant child dare throw herself once more on that kind, maternal bosom, and whispering "*mia madre*" as of old, be taken to the yet warm heart, and forgiven?

But no, no; there was madness in the very thought. Never, in this world, could she hope for pardon, from that one towards whom her own heart most fondly yearned, to recover whose esteem, Edith felt she would willingly, joyfully sacrifice the remainder of her wretched life. But, alas! what could she do?—Call back the dying into life, or blot out the vainly regretted

past from the records of time? Less than this would avail nothing with a mother who was weeping for her child—her only son! and Edith recalling every word of the singular blessing Mrs. Boisragon had given her, when their engagement was first made known, closed her aching eyes, and prayed to die before she met that mother's dreaded look.

But happily for us wild prayers like these are seldom answered, and on the afternoon of the fourth day Edith's aged attendant presented himself at the carriage window, and told her they were now entering the village of —— near which Mrs. Boisragon's cottage was situated.

The weather had cleared considerably since the morning, and there were even a few fitful gleams of sunshine, which every now and then lighted up the distant woods, and gave to the scenery a sort of melancholy charm that to Edith was even more depressing than the utter gloom of the previous days. She started violently and

pressed her hand tightly to her suddenly throbbing heart, as she listened to the servant's information, and then sinking back in the carriage, a deadly faintness came over her, and she felt, for a few minutes, that it would be quite impossible to go through with what she had undertaken.

But the total uselessness of cowardice often gives us a courage which nothing else could inspire, and Edith seeing no earthly means of escape from the fiery trial before her, made a final effort to nerve her spirit, and succeeded so far as to assume an outward composure by the time the carriage drew up at the little garden gate. The little garden where the sun was shining faintly on the leafless trees, and the damp grass, and a few sickly-looking monthly roses, which had survived the summer suns, only, as it seemed, to give a more desolate aspect to this now desolate-looking place.

Edith descended from the carriage and

walked with trembling steps and face of ashy paleness up the narrow pathway to the house, the door of which had been opened at the first sound of the approaching wheels. This she had observed, and her poor heart died within her in reflecting on the different reception she would have met had things been as they once were. There were no loving faces peeping from the windows now, no eager footsteps hastened to bid her welcome—as a stranger, nay as something less honoured than a stranger, she was suffered to enter that house where once all arms and hearts would have opened wide to receive her.

Poor, poor Edith! she must give her birth-right, bit by bit, for the mess of pottage for which she has sold it.

The tears she could no longer restrain—tears which had their source in a mingling of bitter grief and some remnants of ancient pride—were raining thickly down her face when she lifted her trembling hand to the

muffled knocker of the door. But ere she could let it fall again, Nettia was by her side, and the poor, trembling hands were locked tightly in those of Alick's admirable sister.

“Edith—” It was all that for the first few minutes she could say, but the look and tone spoke volumes of consolation to the aching heart of her wretched guest, who felt that by one at least of those she had so deeply injured, she was fully, freely forgiven.

“Edith, I am so glad you are come—we feared your arrival would be delayed by the state of the roads—You must be very, very tired and cold, and hungry. There is a fire in the breakfast-room. Will you warm yourself and take some refreshment before going up stairs?”

It was, doubtless, a great effort to Nettia to speak in this light, indifferent way, to avoid the slightest reference to the object of Edith's journey, to dwell upon those

common-place courtesies which travellers, under ordinary circumstances, expect and are grateful for. But it was wisely and kindly done—for it gave the other time to compose her agitated spirits, and to send back her burning tears to their sanctuary in the desolate heart.

But to this forbearance, however judicious and necessary, there must come an end, and Edith having warmed her frozen fingers at the blazing fire, and swallowed eagerly the glass of wine that Nettia offered, turned to her silent companion, and said timidly, as if she had scarcely a right even to speak beneath that roof,

“You must tell me now about your brother.”

“Yes—yes, I will,” Nettia replied, immediately; “but you have eaten nothing yet, and you look so pale and ill, Edith. Pray, take a little bread.”

“I cannot eat—not yet, at any rate. Do not keep me in suspense, Annie.”

Miss Egerton started and changed color at that name; but Edith had probably forgotten that it was the one Sir Stuart had always called her. She did not even notice Nettia's emotion now; and the latter, quickly recovering herself, continued,

"Alick is not *much* worse than when I wrote. But this cold weather is against him—his cough begins to get very troublesome, now."

"Poor—poor Alick! Does he know that I am come?"

"Yes; he heard the carriage. I fear the meeting will greatly excite him. You must command your own feelings as well as you can, Edith."

"I will do my best, Annie—but it will be a painful trial to both of us. When shall I go to him?"

"I will take you to your room first—as you will want to change your travelling-dress. I have had a fire lighted for you, and I hope you will find everything comfortable."

"I," it was always "I," and not "we," Edith observed; but she had not courage yet, to name the mother's name, though she longed intensely to know the worst she might expect.

"Let us go at once, then," she said, rising from her seat. "I can endure anything better than suspense."

Nettia left Edith at the door of her room, promising to return for her in a quarter of an hour; and though she certainly did not exceed this time, it appeared to Edith a whole eternity that she was waiting there alone.

"Are you quite ready now?" said Nettia, kindly, and taking Edith's hand.

"Quite," was the brief reply, and the two girls walked along the passage together, in a silence which was only broken when they arrived at the door of Alick's room.

Then, Nettia, turning suddenly to her companion, said, in a low, faltering, voice—

“Mama is with my brother, Edith—you will find her much changed.”

Edith almost gasped for breath—but there was no time for hesitation now. Nettia’s hand was on the handle of the door—and the next moment they both stood within the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MEETING.

IN the presence of the mother and the son! The injurer and the injured, face to face at last. The lately plighted lovers meeting as accuser and accused—and the mother standing as a stern judge between them.

But was it thus? Was one breath of reproach or accusation written in Alick's large, eager, and still most loving eyes? Was one hint of accusation or reproach

conveyed in that low, tender, and still most impassioned voice, as it strove to give expression to the welcome, the beaming face had already spoken.

“Edith—this is, indeed, most kind—most generous of you. I had scarcely dared to hope you would come to me. My heart thanks you, dear Edith, better than my lips can do. I am weaker than I was, and easily excited to joy or sadness. Your coming has afforded me a happiness I can scarcely bear—but come closer to me, Edith; let me press your hand once more. How changed you are, dear Edith—how thin and pale.”

This was poor Alick's greeting—and Edith, half-bewildered by her own emotions, the sight of that death-stricken face, and by the consciousness that she was in Mrs. Boisragon's presence, advanced with tottering steps to the bed-side, where she knelt, as if by an irresistible impulse of humility, and grasped the hand that was extended to receive her own.

“Alick, *can* you forgive me?”

It was all she could say, for the deep sobs that were beginning to choke her utterance; but even this was more than Alick needed—for, raising her hand wildly to his lips, he covered it with passionate kisses, and murmured broken words, not only of pardon, but of fervent and undying love, to which Edith listened as one in a dream—her whole mind being absorbed in conjectures as to the mother’s feelings and intentions towards herself. For as yet, Mrs. Boisragon had neither moved nor spoken; and in the rapid glance Edith had given on first entering the room, she had noticed only a pale, careworn countenance, on which no outward signs of anger or indignation were discernible.

Alick mistook her perfect silence and abstraction for sorrow at the sufferings she had occasioned—and more tender and more soothing became his softly whispered words of gratitude and affection, till Edith, roused, at length, to a consciousness of

what was passing, replied to him in a few broken sentences, expressive of her deep repentance for the cruel part she had acted.

“All—all is forgiven and forgotten,” he replied with earnest feeling, “I see you again, Edith ; I hold your little hand in mine. I gaze into those dear, kind eyes, and I am blessed beyond the power of telling. Yet,” and his voice suddenly changed to low, subdued tones of unutterable sadness. “Yet, *‘we do not meet again love, as once we have met.’* Ah, Edith ! your song was a true, though unconscious, prophet ; and my heart did not greatly err in its forebodings that unhappy night.”

“Alick, spare me ! I am sufficiently punished,” said Edith, in a passionately pleading voice, as she raised to his face those still all-powerful eyes, filled now with burning tears. “What can I do—what can I say, to prove to you my sincere and heartfelt sorrow for the past ?—the madness of a moment, Alick ?”

“ Ah ! you have said and done enough, my Edith. Yes, I *may* call you mine,” he continued, in much excitement ; “ while this poor heart beats with mortal life. It will not be long, Edith—but however brief, every feverish throb will be a separate joy, while you are with me, and I may call you mine—my own Edith—as in the old—old times.”

“ Dear Alick, I will not leave you ; but you must speak no more at present—your hands are burning, and your eyes so tired and heavy, that I am sure you must need rest and quiet. Let me smooth your pillows for you. It will not be for the first time.”

Edith had made a desperate effort to speak with this apparent calmness ; but she felt that every instant must be her last of self-possession—that she must either cry aloud for mercy to that motionless figure, or die.

To die would be far—far better than to

endure this stony silence—those coldly averted looks—expressive not of anger or indignation, but of insurmountable loathing and aversion—from one whom, at this moment, she loved better than she had ever done, at whose feet she longed to fall, confessing her sins, and repenting in dust and ashes.

But never did a human countenance offer less encouragement to the exhibition of any kind of feeling, than that of Mrs. Boisragon at the present time. It was as if she had locked up every avenue to sensation—as if she had thrown a thick impenetrable veil over every passion of her nature, leaving nothing visible but cold, settled, changeless indifference.

“Surely,” thought poor Edith, “she has forgotten that she, too, is mortal and prone to err, or my sin must be beyond the reach of human mercy and forgiveness.”

Alick appeared to guess something of what was passing in her mind—for he

raised himself suddenly in his bed, and directed one tender, imploring look, towards his silent mother, who only smiled mournfully upon him in return, and would not understand his meaning.

Edith saw all this, and her heart began to swell with other emotions than sorrow and regret; for its natural pride and haughtiness were not entirely expelled—only subdued into unusual tranquillity by the sufferings she had lately endured.

“I will leave you now, Alick, for a short time,” she said, rising suddenly from her kneeling posture. “You need repose, and I—” her voice faltered for a moment—“I need more fortitude than I have yet been able to attain. God bless you, Alick, and show you the tender mercy you have shown to me.”

She stooped to press her lips upon his pale forehead as she spoke—but he drew

her to him, and folded her in his arms, telling her that this moment of unspeakable happiness, more than repaid him for all the sufferings of the past—invoking Heaven's choicest blessings upon her head, and imploring her, again and again, not to leave him during the little space he had now to live on earth.

Edith's brain was dizzy when she raised herself from his passionate embrace ; and every object in the room swam before her eyes as she attempted to walk to the door. Her strength had given way at last, and she would have fallen to the ground had not a firm hand suddenly grasped her own, and a firm arm been thrown tenderly round her waist.

Thus supported, with her eyes half-closed, but still a dim consciousness of what was passing, she reached her own room, and was laid by the same kind attendant upon the bed. In a few moments she felt some cold essence upon her throbbing temples, and was immediately

conscious of relief from the dizzy faintness that had oppressed her. But, under the impression that it was Mrs. Boisragon, who was ministering to her so tenderly, and thinking that, perhaps, those cold, icy looks might return when this brief illness had passed, Edith would not, at once, give any token of being better; but remained with closed eyes, enjoying, for a little while, the affectionate attentions she was receiving.

But the thought suddenly occurred to her that, as this womanly tenderness and sympathy were incompatible with the feelings of aversion Mrs. Boisragon's former looks had expressed, the latter must have been only assumed, and that the kind heart had still some lingerings of affection, for her who had once been so fondly cherished there.

"And if this is indeed the case," thought Edith, "if one spark of love remains, I will yet win her pardon or die in the attempt."

Another moment for deliberation, a half breathed prayer for success, and then with the old words of endearment upon her lips, with the arms ready to be outspread, with the poor heart beating, oh! so wildly and impetuously—Edith sprang from her reclining posture, opened wide her eyes, and saw—not *la mia madre*, but Nettia, sitting serene and still as usual by the bed.

“How you startled me, Edith,” she exclaimed. “Are you worse, dear—what do you feel?”

“Feel,” cried Edith, her heart and tongue bursting from all restraint, at this cruel disappointment. “Oh! Annie, how *should* I feel? *You* cannot know, but ask those on whose brow is the deep brand of shame, who, having repented of their misdeeds, are dying for one kind hand to efface the burning mark—the only hand that has the power, but which remains still and motionless—which will not raise one finger at the sinner’s imploring cry. And ask those, Annie, whose whole souls are

yearning passionately for one word of pardon from lips beloved and honoured—who would die joyfully and gladly to hear that single word of mercy—a word that never comes. Ask of these—and they will tell you what *I* feel !”

“Dear Edith,” replied Nettia, with tears of pity in her eyes, “you must bear with my poor mother for a little while. Hereafter she will forgive and love you as before—but she cannot conquer her natural feelings sufficiently to do it now. Alick was her pride, her joy, her life itself ; and when she sees him dying in his youth before her eyes, she forgets all but—”

“But that I am his murderess ;” interrupted Edith, in a voice of agony. “Oh ! Annie, pray for me that I may die, for this woe is greater than I can endure.”

“No, Edith,” said Nettia, still more tenderly, “you must not regard matters in this light. Even my mother does not now look upon you so harshly as you just now said. The physician who attends

Alick has declared that the disease of which he is dying must have commenced some months before his disappointment came. He would, in any case, have died young, though perhaps not so young as we fear he will do now. It was the daily sight of his sufferings that first hardened my mother's heart against you, Edith—and though I am sure her reason is now convinced that it was that unhappy accident, far more than your inconstancy, that caused this fatal disease, she still persists in remembering only that he was well and happy three months ago, and that he is now sinking with a broken heart into the grave.”

“Yes, yes, good and kind as you are, Nettia, you cannot conceal from me or from yourself that I have at least hastened his death; and made his last days on earth most wretched ones. I cannot expect forgiveness from a mother in a case so dreadful as this; but her silence is destroying me, Annie. If she would only

“speak, though it were but to revile and curse me, I could bear it better.”

“She has chosen her own course, Edith, from which even Alick, with tears and prayers, could not move her. For his sake you will try to be patient under it ; and Heaven, in its own good time, will soften that deeply stricken heart.”

“And reward yours, I trust, Annie, for the love and mercy it has shewn to me. I never thought, till now, that angel-natures dwelt in this sinful world ; but how black and evil my own soul appears, when I see the purity and nobleness of yours. Pray for me, Annie. I have faith in prayers from such as you.”

Nettia was deeply touched, and as she bent down to kiss (for the first time since Edith's arrival) the pale, wasted cheek of her once brilliant rival, warm tears fell where her lips had been, and poor Edith fancied, in the excitement of her feelings, that these pitying tears must have some

mysterious power to wash away the guilt and shame from her burdened heart.

For the time, at least, the acuteness of her pain was lulled ; and when Nettia left her, she closed her aching eyes, and slept.

CHAPTER XVII.

EDITH'S RESOLVE.

DURING the rest of that day, Edith remained in her own room, for Alick had become suddenly worse after she left him, and they feared the excitement of another interview at present. But Nettia came in and took her tea with the solitary guest, and did everything, in her power, to lighten, for her, the tedium of those long, anxious hours.

It was very difficult, though, to maintain

any sort of conversation, without reference to the past ; and Edith, more than once, had been on the point of opening her whole heart to Nettia—of confessing all its struggles from the first, and its final weakness and defeat in the hour of temptation. But Nettia appeared rather to shun receiving any confidences of this nature, as she not only avoided herself anything that could lead to them, but eagerly turned the conversation into a different channel when Edith, in the remotest degree, alluded to the past. One thing, however, the latter resolved to make her companion comprehend—and this was, that no engagement existed, or ever would exist, between Sir Stuart Bernarde and herself. Nettia received the intelligence without any further demonstration of emotion, than a slight and quickly subsiding blush ; and Edith looked upon her as a greater marvel than ever,

The long day came to an end at length ; but there was still the longer night to go

through—the night when all the spirits of darkness, and phantoms of despair, have a tenfold power over human hearts—and when sorrows, that appeared tolerable during the bustle and the light of day, become like some mighty incubus sitting heavily upon our souls.

To Edith, it was a night of suffering without intermission, for she could sleep no more, and she was forced to listen to the cautious footsteps, and the low, whispering sounds—mingled, occasionally, with a prolonged and hollow cough—that came from the chamber of sickness.

Then it was, during the lonely watches of that dreary night, that an intense and powerful desire was created within her, to relieve, in some way, the sufferings she had occasioned—to make some atonement—some compensation to Alick, for the wretchedness of the last few months. An idea had suddenly suggested itself to her mind, and she longed impatiently now for

the morning's light to carry it into execution.

Nettia came very early into her room, but Edith was already dressed, and waiting for her.

"Ah, you have had no sleep, I see," said the former, with a gently chiding look ; "dear Edith, how will you bear another exciting day ?"

"Oh, *I* shall do very well," was the quick reply ; "but Alick ?—how did he pass the night ? Is he better or worse this morning ?"

"He is feverish and excited ; but, he says, this is only because he knows you are in the house, and not with him. He has not had a worse night than usual."

"Yet I heard you all moving continually in his room."

"Yes, he never can be left alone. Mama and myself take it in turns to watch beside him."

"It is too much for you ; but I shall take my turn for the future."

“ You, Edith ?” said Nettia, looking amazedly at the speaker, and then adding, when she saw that there was no appearance of wandering in her eye—“ No, indeed, dear Edith, we could not permit that.”

“ Well, when may I go to him, Annie ?”

“ As soon as you please, for he will only be restless and unhappy till he sees you beside him again.”

“ I will go at once, Is Mrs. Boisragon there ?”

“ Yes—she scarcely ever leaves him during the day. But do you wish to speak to him alone ?”

“ It is of little consequence. No, Annie ; let your mother remain.”

Mrs. Boisragon was sitting in her former place when Edith went in, and she neither moved nor raised her eyes on the opening of the door ; but Alick, testified even more delight than he had done on the preceding day, welcoming his pale visitor with looks of beaming tenderness.

Edith sat down beside him, and laid her hand in his. Alick started, gazed almost incredulously at that little hand, on which, since yesterday, had been placed his parting gift, the sacred ring of betrothal—then grew red and pale by turns, and finally looked up into the agitated face that was bending over him, and tremblingly pronounced her name.

“Edith.”

And Edith, bending still lower, till her breath fanned his cheek, and her lips were close to his ear, whispered a few words of apparently magical import, for Alick’s whole countenance became suddenly irradiated as if by the wand of an enchanter, and, starting up, he pressed the speaker convulsively to his wildly throbbing heart, calling her by every fond and endearing name a passionate human heart could suggest.

Mrs. Boisragon listened with painful interest to the dialogue that now ensued.

“But assure me yet again, my Edith, that this will not be too great a sacrifice on your part—that it will interfere with no other claims—that you have thought well and seriously of what you are about to do. Ah, it seems to me that I am brutally selfish in allowing you to make such a vast, vast sacrifice.”

“Dear Alick, banish such ideas. I shall be only too grateful to have the privilege of adding in any way to your happiness, of sharing with those more faithful ones the duties that should have been mine alone—and with which, Alick, believe me, on my soul! no other claims interfere.”

“And you will really be my wife, my own, own wife, after all, Edith, and never leave me more in this world. It seems too great a happiness coming after such utter misery. But, dearest Edith, if by any chance I should recover, would you not regret—are you quite, quite sure of your own feelings now?”

“I deserve your suspicion, Alick ; but only get well, and see if I cannot prove that it is unfounded.”

“You have proved already that you are an angel,” said Alick, with joy and excitement beaming from every feature, and pressing rapturously to his heart the little hand that was, at length, to be his own for ever. Then turning round, and raising his voice, he said, imploringly—“Mother, dearest mother—have you no blessing for your children ?”

Edith had not courage to lift her eyes ; but she trembled violently, and waited breathlessly for the answer.

Mrs. Boisragon rose slowly from her seat and approached the bed, but not the side where Edith sat. Laying her hand on Alick’s head, she said, solemnly and tenderly—

“My heart has blessed you, dearest, from the moment of your birth until now. Heaven send you peace, and give you, if it

is indeed for your good, the desire of your soul, even at this eleventh hour. My child, my child, would that I might die for you."

And overcome by the feelings she had so long kept in check, the miserable mother fell, weeping passionately, on the neck of her dying boy—while Edith, heart-sick and utterly despairing now, stole silently and unnoticed from the room.

Seeking Nettia, she informed her briefly of what had passed between herself and Alick ; and the sister, though warmly applauding Edith's courage and resolution, doubted whether her brother would have strength to endure so sudden a reaction from despair to the summit of happiness.

"For even," she said, "if he knew he must die the next hour, I am certain he would consider it the height of human bliss to call you, for that single hour, his own."

"I ought, perhaps, to have proposed it

first to you, or to your mother," Edith said, despondingly. "But for this cruel estrangement between Mrs. Boisragon and myself, I would have done so. Ah, Annie, she is very hard upon me. It was not thus that the prodigal son was received into his father's house."

"Have patience, dear Edith," the other replied; "and, remember, that we are neither of us qualified to judge of a mother's feelings. All will come right in the end."

Edith shuddered.

"The end, Annie. What can be the end of such a wasted life as mine?"

"Peace, I would fervently hope, Edith—that peace which is promised to all who truly repent the errors of the past."

"Annie, that peace will never, never visit me, however sincerely I may repent, until your mother forgives, and takes me to her heart again. Think, Annie—she will be *my* mother now, and I shall not dare to call her so—not dare to offer her

the duty and affection of a daughter, not dare even to raise my eyes with one look of love to her's."

"Dearest Edith, we cannot tell how the step you meditate may work upon her feelings—Let us hope for the best—and be very sure no efforts shall be wanting on my part to procure for you the pardon and restored affection you so greatly desire.'

"Oh, that I know, Annie, but there is no hope for me, I am very certain. If Alick's prayers were powerless I may indeed despair—But you will advise with her respecting our marriage. He entreats that there may be no delay. The license I understand was procured before, so that the clergyman alone is wanting."

"But Alick cannot leave his room, Edith. It will be necessary I fancy to get a special permission for the ceremony to take place there. This will occupy several days, I fear."

"Ah, we neither of us thought of that

—For these several days then I must endure those cold, cold looks, that killing silence, without even the hope of change —Annie, you will despise me for my weakness—but there are some things which my nature was never formed to bear.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

A WEDDING, AT LAST.

It seemed that happiness was always to produce on Alick a perfectly miraculous effect. During the two succeeding days he grew so rapidly better, that though the doctors refused to give a decided opinion yet, they were evidently mystified at the change, and in the hearts of those who were watching him so anxiously, a ray of hope had again begun to dawn.

Edith spent much of this time alone, for

she had not always courage to enter Mrs. Boisragon's presence, and Alick was too considerate to urge her to do so. He hoped with Nettia that his mother's heart was gradually softening towards their unhappy guest, and that the marriage day would witness the much longed for reconciliation.

Edith herself, in spite of her frequent assertions to the contrary, cherished secretly the same expectation, and it formed the only green spot that her mind, in all its mournful visions of the future, had to rest upon. She wrote to her father and to Margaret, announcing her intention of becoming Alick's wife, and remaining with him while his life was spared. This over, she had nothing more to do but to wait patiently for the day when her new duties were to commence, when she was to make atonement (all that she could make now) for the deeply lamented past, by sealing, for ever, her once broken vows.

And at length the morning arrived, and

with it, came stealing into Edith's room, through the apertures of the closed blinds, the first ray of sunshine that had gladdened her sight since the wretched day she beheld it shining with forlorn brightness on the desolate garden, along which she had walked with such trembling steps, and such a sinking heart. The heart was a little firmer now, for a hope had stolen into it, and was brightening its gloom even as the winter sunbeam was piercing the obscurity of her darkened chamber.

Almost ere she had time to collect into order the thoughts that in her sleep had wandered into the old times of long ago, the door of her room opened softly, and Nettia came in with quite a cheerful smile upon her lips, and holding in her hand a pale, monthly rose, shining with the moisture of a recent shower.

"See, dearest Edith," she said, bending down to kiss her future sister, "I have brought you—not the last rose of summer, but the last rose of autumn, which ought to be infinitely more precious. It is a poor

offering, however," she continued, in a sadder voice, "for a bride so young and fair as you, dear Edith—but perhaps it suits the occasion better than a costlier gift."

Edith tried to return the kind and hopeful smile with which Nettia presented it, but, as she took it in her hand, the delicate leaves, already shaken by the rain that had fallen on them, suddenly gave way entirely, and fell in a bright shower on the snowy covering of the bed.

"A bad omen, I fear," said the bride elect, as she collected the scattered leaves for the giver's sake. But Nettia, though she looked a little paler than before, made no remark on the incident, hastily changing the subject by asking Edith how she had slept.

"Well, very well, and for the first time since my arrival," was the reply. "I hope Alick was equally fortunate."

"Not in regard to sleeping," said Nettia, "for he has not yet closed his eyes since

the night before last. He complains of no suffering, however ; and I think looks wonderfully well this morning."

"Who sat up with him during the night, Annie?"

"Mama, until one o'clock, but then she felt very poorly, and I persuaded her to go to bed. It has become such a habit with me now to sit up, that I scarcely feel it—and I was so glad to be with dear Alick, and to see him so peaceful and happy."

"He is then really happy, now, Annie?"

"Perfectly—he seems to have nothing to desire but a reconciliation between you and mama—we spoke much of this last night, and we both think, dear Edith, that it will take place to-day."

"Ah, Heaven grant it ! but tell me, Annie, what Alick thinks respecting his health."

"I don't believe he anticipates a long life ; but he is entirely resigned to the will of God in this and every matter. He begged me to read the bible to him, par-

ticularly those beautiful psalms, in which King David acknowledges the great and undeserved mercies he has received from Heaven. Poor Alick was deeply affected, and I could see that he felt the same intense gratitude, the same profound sense of unworthiness that is there so touchingly and sublimely expressed.

“Dear, dear Alick,” said Edith, with sincere emotion, “he is far too good for me. I often wonder Annie how he could have chosen one so entirely unlike himself in character and disposition.”

“A man’s heart has no rules,” replied Nettia, with an involuntary sigh, to cover which she presently added smilingly—“And you, Edith, dear, have the power of bewitching everybody.”

“Would that it were so, Annie,” was the eager answer “for then I know how I would use that power to-day.”

“*Espérons toujours*, sister Edith—And now I must really leave you or you will never be dressed in time.”

How different to that light and elegant costume in which Edith was to have gone as a bride to the Altar—that costume in which she had once arrayed herself with such girlish pride and satisfaction, was the simple robe of dark merino that she put on with so little thought or carefulness at present. In her younger days she had often amused herself and Margaret by planning her wedding dress, and an odd train of thought arose now in her mind, as she reflected how entirely the reverse of all these various imaginary costumes, was the one in which she was really destined to pass from girlhood into the dignity of a matron and a wife.

“But it matters little,” she said to herself, as she turned from the glass that reflected her pale and careworn face—“It matters little what dress covers an aching heart ; and the events of this day will decide whether or not mine is ever to be free from pain again.”

As she was passing out of her room,

Nettia met her and explained that Mrs. Boisragon was too unwell to be present at the ceremony.

“But this is my doing, dear Edith,” she continued, observing the other’s instant look of disappointment. “Mama would have risen, ill as she is, but I entreated her not to do so. It will be an affecting ceremony to all of us, and to her I am sure it would be overpowering ; so she has agreed only to come in when it is concluded—and I think Edith, although not a word has passed between my mother and myself on the subject, that she will take you to her heart, when you are really her daughter, with all the affection of old times.”

Edith’s expressive countenance evinced the delight this opinion afforded her—and the two girls went down and took their breakfast together in the little parlour now brightened into cheerfulness by the long absent rays of the blessed sun, which shone into the dark corners, and played merrily upon the pictured walls, and rested lovingly

upon those pale young faces, as if anxious to give them that aspect of summer gladness, which should have been the heart's gift alone.

Before their simple meal was quite concluded, the doctor, (an old friend of the family, who had agreed to act the part of father, to Edith, on the occasion) came in, and was followed in a few minutes by the clergyman who was to perform the ceremony. Edith had seen both these gentlemen before, so she was able to greet them with tolerable self-possession now ; and Nettia soon left her with them while she went to prepare Alick for their reception.

The next ten minutes appeared an age to her whose fate was so speedily to be decided—but at the end of this time, Nettia re-appeared, and looking herself very nervous and agitated, conducted them all in silence to her brother's room.

Edith went in first, and Alick, who was lying dressed upon the bed, welcomed her with smiles of quiet happiness, though the red flush upon his cheeks told of consider-

able excitement beneath that unusually calm exterior ; and caused the prudent doctor, on his entrance, to advise the delay of the ceremony yet another day. But this of course the bridegroom would not hear of, and even Nettia could not have the heart to counsel it very strongly—so in a few seconds the temporary altar was formed—and the beautiful and impressive service began.

Edith's courage throughout the whole of the ceremony was admirable, and excited the astonishment and the praise of all—She was deathly pale, but her voice was firm and clear ; and those touching words “for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death us do part,” she gave with a solemnity and earnestness of expression, that affected every one who heard her. Alick was infinitely less self-possessed, and though no one could doubt the deep sincerity with which his heart echoed the sacred vows he was uttering, there was, at intervals, a

troubled look upon his countenance, and a sudden wandering in his eye that contrasted strangely with the calm composure of the pale young bride. His responses, however, were firmly pronounced, and, in putting on the ring, his eye sought Edith's with a glance of fond affection not to be mistaken.

“Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.”

The words were spoken—the concluding blessing was given. All was over. The clergyman and the doctor shook hands warmly with the young couple, and then hastened away, while at the same moment entered a pale and deeply agitated woman, who had been waiting nearly all the time outside the door.

Alick saw his mother and smiled faintly upon her ; but it was to his bride that he turned—to Edith that his arms were extended, to her that his eyes were so yearningly raised. And she, answering this mute appeal, sprang to her husband's

embrace ; and the words " My wife, my own wife," came like the echo of some passionate tone upon her ear.

" My wife, my own wife !" There was nothing more. A sunbeam entered into the room, and rested for a moment with steady brightness upon the newly wedded pair. But it was charged with no mission to warm the cold, cold bridegroom. What could warm him when his Edith's kisses had lost the power to do so ? when love's embrace failed to set in rapid motion, the pulses of his languid veins.

Till death us do part ! Young wife, your task has not been a long one. Your duties are soon at an end. Release yourself from those encircling arms ; the grave is your rival now. Death and life can have no contact. Let the cold bridegroom rest.

And young wife, close your ears if you can, from that shriek which rends the air, and seems to mount to the very skies, as

though it would bring down the soul that has just been taken thither.

And thou poor mother ! Listen for the angels' harps. Look through those floating clouds to the deep blue of the eternal Heavens. Rest on Thy Maker's promises—and be still !

CHAPTER XIX.

THE HOUSE OF MOURNING.

It was only in the solemn stillness of the night that succeeded that day of terrible interest—*her wedding day*—that Edith could recal, with any distinctness, the rapid and awful events that had stamped it for ever as a day apart from all others, as a day to be remembered when every less important record should have faded from the mind.

The necessity for action, for attention

to those common-place details, which will enter into the most overwhelming earthly bereavement, had sustained her during the day—but all these were over now—a quiet, as of the grave itself, reigned throughout the house. Edith's brief labours were at an end ; and she was alone with those torturing thoughts which once fully awakened, would not be hushed to sleep again.

With the regularity and precision of a moving picture, on which she was forced to gaze, the scenes of the morning passed before her shrinking sight ; while the words and tones that had mingled in the tragedy, rang in her ear with even more startling clearness than when they had been really uttered.

First came, surrounded with an air of quiet sanctity, the marriage ceremony—the grave and rather severe looking priest, the friendly doctor, the pale, anxious sister, and the bridegroom with his almost spiritual aspect contending now with one of earthly

excitement and something else (it might have been physical suffering) which could not be so easily understood. This passed, with all its solemn words, and Heaven-recorded vows, and then some of the actors disappeared, and Edith saw again her young husband's outstretched arms, his yearning look, his half languid, half rapturous smile—while she was folded tight, tight, in his embrace, knowing that the mother, with tearful eyes, stood looking on, waiting, as they both fondly hoped, to speak the long wished for words of pardon, to take both bride and bridegroom to her heart and bless them.

“*My wife, my own wife!*”

The words were Alick's—but the voice, how low and changed it was—how it struck on Edith's heart like the faint dying away of some thrilling melody, and how it blanched the cheek that should have been glowing with the warm kisses of newly wedded love. Alas! the bride-

groom's lips had no longer any fire or warmth to impart. Colder and colder they grew, though his young wife, half in fear and half in hope, still clung to him, and held him to her heart—uttered no word, gave no sign, till fear was changed to horror, till hope had given place to the most cruel and overwhelming despair.

A scene like this, was not one that the chief living actor in it, could calmly, in the deep stillness of the lonely night, recall. Neither was that which followed it, when a mother's cry of bitter anguish broke the silence that had succeeded to the first startled consciousness of a spirit's flight from earth ; and when throwing herself on the dead body of her child, she uttered those wild and passionate lamentations in which reason and religion take no part.

But frightful as was the vivid remembrance of such scenes to Edith, there was one which affected her more deeply, which

smote on her heart with more cruel force than all the rest. There was no escaping it, however. It must pass before her, as the other's have done ; she must see again that mother's look of indescribable loathing and aversion, as timidly, (with the double privilege of a daughter and a wife), she fell on her knees beside the living and the dead, mutely petitioning for some token of pity and affection, in this moment of mutual trial and bitter mourning. She must hear again that shrill, unnatural voice, accusing her as the wicked author of all this desolation, and bidding her, if she would escape the maledictions of a bereaved and nearly maddened parent—of a mother robbed of her child—depart at once and for ever from her sight.

The scenes that followed, though they had sufficed, at the time, to keep the mind from dwelling too exclusively on the preceding ones, were not of a nature to recur with any particular force or distinctness, in the midst of so many of a deeper inter-

est. And Edith had only a vague consciousness of having acted under Nettia's orders during the remaining part of the day—of having no time allowed her for weeping—after the moment she had obeyed Mrs. Boisragon's peremptory command by leaving the chamber of death—and of having felt, from that time till now, a sense of bewilderment in her brain, and an oppression that appeared even more physical than mental, but which she believed had given her the power of going through the duties that had been appointed her, with that mechanical order and quietness Nettia had so greatly wondered at.

But in solitude and inaction tears had come to her relief—the weight on her brain was gone, and thought and memory had emerged from the clouds which obscured them, and were performing zealously their mission of fiery chastisement.

She did not attempt to lie down, far less to sleep ; but, sitting by the window—the blinds of which had been left undrawn, she

looked out into the dark, starless sky, and acknowledged, for the first time in her life, the want of religion to sustain and strengthen her soul.

It was frightful and appalling to feel alone in such a grief as this, to have no mother's bosom to weep upon—no father's or sister's sympathizing tears to cool her burning brow. Nettia was not less kind than usual ; but all her sympathies—all her cares, were claimed by one whom Edith dared not think of—one who hovered between life and death—between reason and madness—and who might hover thus for long, long weeks of suspense and agony. A bible lay on the table by Edith's side—it had lain there unopened—almost unnoticed—since she had occupied the room ; but now she took it up, and turned over the pages, in the vague hope of finding something from which her poor heart could extract a ray of peace.

“ But the wicked are like the troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt..

There is no peace, saith my God, for the wicked."

This was the passage on which her eyes first rested, and shuddering, she laid the book down again, while a feeling of even deeper despair crept over her—and with it mingled a strange, new apprehension, concerning that life to come, which Edith had, till now, constantly dismissed from her mind, as a subject belonging only to old age, and infirmities—a thing to be put off for a more convenient season.

That convenient season had, at length, arrived. She had been face to face with death—the death of the youthful and beloved—she had seen human sorrow in its most affecting shape—her own dreams of life were lying withered, like the leaves of autumn, around her desolate heart—and whither could she flee for consolation.

To whom, but to her Father in Heaven, could she turn for healing and for peace ?

Half-fearfully, as one who has just been awakened to his danger, and half-trustfully,

as one who clings to the only rock which offers a chance of refuge, Edith knelt to pray earnestly, and tremblingly, for the first time in all her life—to pray that the pardon of her Maker might become to her of greater moment, an object of more ardent seeking, than the pardon of a human being like herself. Peace—peace—the peace of Heaven was the burden of her prayer, and at its conclusion, she took up the sacred book again, and read patiently and diligently till the dim, misty light of a November morning broke into her room, and reminded her that she would need rest for the probable trials of the coming day.

Let us leave her now to the guardian-angel, who will keep watch over her while she sleeps, and see how the other mourners of this little household have passed the night.

Come into that room where a soft shaded light is burning, and where, beside the white curtained bed, sits an old woman

nodding drowsily in her chair, and a young girl with pale cheeks, and eyes that look heavy with tears, though no tears are visible in them. The old woman is the nurse, who has been hired to share, with the faithful daughter, the labour of watching her unconscious mother; but the nurse grows weary of the watch, and the daughter has kept it during nearly the whole night alone, listening to the wild ravings of delirium, or counting the motions of the ever quickening pulse, during the short snatches of troubled sleep that exhausted nature *will* take, even at the fever's height.

Nettia had found strength in the hour of need to support her own burden of sorrow—to support, but not to throw it off. It pressed heavily upon her poor heart till, and often during the long, silent hours of patient vigil, when the prayer for renewed strength and fortitude ascended, had she been tempted to add a fervent petition to be taken home—home to her father's house

“where there shall be no more sin neither sorrow, nor crying.” But the remembrance of her mother, so desolate, so bereaved, so helpless too now in her deep affliction, had made the half uttered request appear a selfish and a guilty one, and she had substituted an entreaty for more entire submission to the will and decrees of Heaven.

Yet serene and patient as poor Nettia appeared, Edith would have acknowledged had she been able to read in her heart, that there was another besides herself—one far worthier too of earth’s choicest blessings—whose youthful dreams had been scattered like the leaves of autumn in the cold blast of disappointment, and whose days (in spite of her constant efforts at contentment) were still all “dark and dreary.”

It must be a bitter grief indeed that can make the young and innocent sigh for death, and esteem the cold, dark grave, a blessed refuge, while the tide of life still

flows unchecked and buoyantly in their pure and unsullied veins.

That morning's light which found Edith seeking comfort in the pages of her long neglected bible, discovered Nettia standing in unfailing patience by her mother's side, wrestling valiantly with the intense physical exhaustion which she felt creeping over her, and praying silently, not for herself, but for that beloved and stricken one, whose wild ravings became every hour more touching and more alarming.

CHAPTER XX

THE RETURN HOME.

AND for days and days there came no change, no speck of blue amidst the heavy clouds that overshadowed those on whom the hand of Heaven had been laid. Mrs. Boisragon grew worse, and very little hopes were entertained of her recovery, while Nettia, strong and courageous as she was, sank at last under her almost superhuman exertions ; and Edith alone was left to nurse and care for them both.

New however as these duties were to her, she performed them well and zealously, though they were often encompassed with trials and difficulties that taxed her self control and patience to the utmost. Mrs. Boisragon, although she appeared to recognize no one else who approached her, always knew Edith, and would either utter the most passionate reproaches when she came near, or demand from her, in the most piteous and touching tones—her son, her darling Alick, while tears would rain in torrents down her wasted, hollow cheeks.

One day, before the funeral had taken place, and the coffin yet stood open in an adjoining room, Edith came in softly to replace the nurse, and took her seat behind the curtain of the bed, hoping to remain there unseen. Mrs. Boisragon had been much quieter than usual, all that morning; and though the fever had not yet abated, they hoped some favourable change was about to take place. A few minutes, however, after the nurse had gone out, she

suddenly pulled aside the curtain, and looking fixedly at Edith, said in a shrill, excited voice,

“Where is Alick ? I want to go to my son—you have hid him from me, but I will find him yet.”

Edith was too much startled to be able immediately to reply ; and the poor mother, with increasing energy, repeated the demand—and, finally, before Edith could interpose, sprang from the bed, and moved towards the half-open door.

“I know now, where you have hid him,” she almost screamed, pushing aside the slight form of her terrified daughter-in-law, who had attempted to seize her hands ; “and I shall go to him and take him away ; you cannot stop me, wicked and powerful as you are. Nobody shall stop me now.”

Edith had sufficient presence of mind to spring back and pull the bell furiously ; but, before the summons could be obeyed, the unhappy mother had reached the room where her son lay dead—and it required

all the united strength of the nurse and the two servants of the house, to force her from the coffin, round which she had wound her arms, while she talked in low and indescribably plaintive tones, to the inanimate corpse it enclosed.

From this time a second nurse was appointed ; and it was judged prudent for Edith to keep entirely out of Mrs. Boisragon's room. To Nettia, therefore, she gave all her care and attention, who was soon sufficiently recovered to resume her place by her mother's side ; and this was particularly fortunate, as Edith suddenly received a summons from her sister, which she could not hesitate a moment in obeying. Her father was ill, very ill, Margaret said, adding that Edith must not delay her return a single hour.

There is nothing that endears people so much and so rapidly to each other, as a great, mutual affliction ; and Nettia and Edith found this parting a really formidable trial, under the unhappy circumstances

by which they were both surrounded. There was no help for it, however, and they said farewell at last, with many bitter tears, and feelings of anticipated loneliness that, on Nettia's part, were but too well founded.

“Dear Annie,” Edith said, as they walked together down the little garden—at the gate of which stood the post-chaise, that was to convey the young widow to new scenes of probable suffering. “Dear Annie, if our worst fears, respecting your mother—to you I may say *our* mother—our tenderly beloved mother, are realized (which Heaven, in its mercy, forbid), remember that my home becomes yours. We are sisters in name—we have been truly sisters in affliction—your generous forgetfulness of the wrongs I have done you, have made us, I hope, for ever, sisters in love—and why should not our home become one—until, at least, you find a better. Dearest Annie, say it shall be so.”

“Edith,” Nettia replied, through thickly falling tears. “Be very sure of this—that

if I am deprived of my dear, dear mother, the object, next in interest and affection to me, will be my poor brother's wife—the wife he loved so devotedly, and who has been to me, during this season of mourning, such a kind and tender sister.”

In a few minutes more, the one was being rapidly whirled along the dull, deserted-looking road leading from the cottage to the village, and the other had returned to her station by the bed of sickness, where she remained, with little intermission, till the thick snows of that dreary winter had melted from the earth, and the cheering sunbeams rested once more upon the homes of the living and the dead.

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It was late in the evening when Edith arrived at Fernley Manor, and springing

from the carriage, without asking a single question of the servant, who stood bowing at the door, she ran upstairs and was soon clasped in her sister's arms—while, to her eager questions, Margaret replied that their father yet lived, and was still perfectly sensible.

“ If you are not too worn out, dearest,” she continued, scarce able to restrain her tears at the sight of that childish-looking widow, and her changed appearance, “ I would advise your going to see him at once, as he has enquired for you repeatedly to-day ; and I fear, dear Edith—it seems almost cruel to say so to you now—but I do really fear that his end is approaching fast.”

“ Margey, I will go,” said Edith, quietly, “ I believe I am prepared for the worst that can befall me.”

The sisters went in together, and the dying man, who was breathing with great difficulty, turned slowly round, and recognised his youngest daughter.

“Dearest papa,” she said, throwing off her bonnet, and bending to kiss his flushed cheek ; “I am come to assist Margaret in nursing you now. I will never leave you again.”

“I am glad you have come, Edith,” he answered, though it was evident that every word was a painful effort to him ; “but you are too late to nurse me, poor child. Margaret has been a good girl, a very good girl—and she will look after you when—when it is all over, Edith.”

Edith sat upon the bed, and held her father’s hand. She dared not trust her voice to speak again, at present ; but he looked at her earnestly, for some time, and then said—

“You have shed many tears, Edith, since you left your home. You should have stayed with us—nobody could love you better than we do.”

“Dearest papa, I never doubted your affection. But I have indeed had much sorrow. In the same hour that I became

a wife I became a widow also, and those who are now both near and dear to me, I left in great affliction, one of them, the dearest—probably at the point of death.”

“ Ah, poor child, your troubles are beginning early, and I must leave you in the midst of them. But, Edith, you will not miss your old father much. I used, at times, to regret bitterly not having more of your love ; but it is a comfort to me now, a great comfort, to think that my death will not add very much to your sorrows—unless indeed it should be the means of—”

“ Of what, dearest papa ?” asked Edith, when her father suddenly paused and looked round the room.

“ Margaret will tell you,” he resumed, in a thicker voice ; “ I am forgetting all things. Emily, Emily, I cannot see you—won’t you come to me, and let all the past—be—be forgotten—for her sake.”

Margaret now approached the bed, and

bathed the temples of her dying father, who looked up and smiled at her as she bent over him.

"I can see *you*, Margaret," he said, in a clearer voice ; "you are always at your post, always faithful to your poor old father. Good, good girl ! Heaven will reward your patience and devotion. Sit down, dear—don't leave me again."

"You see," whispered Edith to her sister, "I only unsettle and confuse his mind, while you have the power of tranquillizing it. But it is just, Margey, and natural that it should be so ; for I have been faithful to none."

The Major caught the last words only, and he made an effort to connect the ideas they had awakened in his half wandering mind.

"You were wrong, very wrong, not to be faithful to your first lover, my dear child. I hope his death was not occasioned by anything you did--but, perhaps, he was not the one

who died. You have put on that black dress for your husband. It will do for me too, Edith."

Poor Edith—it seemed as though her sins were to be for ever brought before her, as though everybody were conspiring to thrust upon her the remembrance of her deeply lamented errors, to goad to madness a conscience already pierced with many deadly wounds.

Margaret sought to turn her father's ideas into a different channel, and both sisters rejoiced equally when, in a tired and feeble voice, he asked to have the Prayer Book read to him.

His eldest daughter had endeavoured frequently, during his illness, to induce him to listen to the Bible, but he had a prejudice in favour of the Prayer Book, which he never explained, but which Margaret found it quite impossible to overcome.

She selected now, therefore, the song of Simeon, and as the old man listened, they fancied that an expression of greater tran-

quillity stole gently over his rapidly sharpening features, and that his lips moved as if in silent prayer.

Suddenly, the hand that Edith still held, pressed her fingers convulsively—she looked up into his face, but no glance of intelligence met her own. The eyes were becoming fixed and glassy—the death damps were gathering fast upon the brow. One moment of breathless suspense, and then came the fearful rattle, with a strange and startling sound. This ceased, and the sisters, by a mutual impulse, fell upon their knees at the bed-side, and remained, for a few minutes, mute and awestruck in the presence of Death.

CHAPTER XXI.

MARGARET'S REVELATIONS

A FORTNIGHT had passed ; and Margaret and Edith, having followed their father to the grave, and mourned his death, each according to the measure of her affection for him—*both* more sincerely than passionately—were beginning to speak of their future plans and arrangements. It had been found, on the opening of the Major's will, that his daughters were entitled to

twelve thousand pounds each, in funded property, and that his personal possessions (which were not of large amount) were to be divided equally between them. This will having been made when Edith's marriage was in contemplation, nothing was said about a guardian for her, and this was the subject she had now first broached to her sister, who had hitherto appeared strangely reluctant to enter upon a discussion of the future.

“Of course, Margey,” she said, “my having been married, though but for a few minutes, must be sufficient to make me independent of any one's control—As Mrs. Boisragon I could go alone all over the world without impropriety—but I want you to explain what our poor father meant when he said his death would not add to my unhappiness, unless it should be the means—and there he stopped, referring me to you for an elucidation of the mystery.”

Margaret looked uneasy and irresolute.

The tears too gathered in her eyes, as she said—

“Would you wish to leave me, Edith?”

“Margey, my own good Margey, how could such a thought enter into your head? No, a thousand times no, if you will let me stay—But I was thinking in case of your marriage some day—you blush, Margey, and I see my suspicions are not so wide of the mark—Well, in this case then, I wish to know *if there is any one living who can assert the slightest claim to my duty and obedience?*”

There was no evading this question, so solemnly and emphatically put, and Margaret replied gravely, and sorrowfully, her sister fancied—

“There is your mother, Edith. She lives. I have seen her recently. She *will* claim you the moment she hears of her husband’s death.”

Edith’s colour varied alternately from white to the deepest red—She trembled excessively, and though her lips did not

move, her speaking eyes implored Margaret to continue.

“I will tell you all I know now, Edith. You must remember that some time ago, when your mind was entirely engrossed with other matters, our poor father received letters which greatly affected him, and shortly after which, on the pretence of business, I went to London. The first of these letters was from an aged relative of your mother’s, who had resided nearly all her life in some very obscure part of North Wales. It was written on her death bed, and contained the startling intelligence, attested on the oath of a dying woman, that your mother had been living under her roof from the time she left her husband so mysteriously. The writer added that strong personal dislike to Major Lascelles had alone actuated her conduct, that her life had been irreproachable ever since, and that the object of the present letter was not only to convey this intelligence, but to prepare your father for a demand

which, on the writer's death, would be made—the demand of a mother who would then be alone in the world, for her daughter, her only child. You may imagine, dear Edith, the effect this singular letter produced on your poor father, for though of late it has been less apparent, owing to your own entire pre-occupation, he loved you with a devotedness belonging more to a mother's than a father's feelings. It was very long ere I could convince him that he had the power of resisting this demand; but I succeeded at last, and then he was tranquil till your mother's letter arrived. Brief, cold, and peremptory it was—you see I conceal nothing, Edith—stating that on such a day, an early one too, she should be in London to meet you—and that she trusted, as you had been left so many years to your father's care, he would not hesitate now in resigning you at once to her.

“ You may guess the rest, Edith. I met her at the appointed time and place,

convinced her that her application could not be entertained, that she had no power of demanding you from your father, and that it would break his heart to give you up. She was evidently much disappointed, but she said very little, and to my utter astonishment asked only one question concerning you."

"And that was—" said Edith, who had been listening in breathless attention to her sister's narration.

"That was, whether you resembled herself."

"And what did you reply?"

"That I saw a most striking likeness—only that you were very short and slight, while she is tall and inclined to fullness of figure."

"But how did you like her, Margey? Ah! you do not tell me half enough."

"My dearest Edith, our interview was very short—and the bad news I brought her, doubtless, made her manner colder than it would otherwise have been. She is

still a very lovely woman ; and to you, I have no doubt, she will be all kindness and affection."

" Yet, Margaret, I see plainly that you are not prepossessed in her favour—that you rather dread the thoughts of my going to her. You have not written to communicate our father's death."

" Edith, could I look forward with any degree of satisfaction to the thoughts of losing you for ever ? At a time too, when your sorrows have drawn our hearts so much closer together—when you so greatly need the sympathy and love of one who has known you from childhood. Ah, Edith ! it will be very hard for me to see you go—even to your mother."

" Dearest Margaret, listen to me. You know, or perhaps, you scarcely do know, the romantic wish, I nourished for years, to discover this unknown mother—to lavish upon her that hoard of secret affection, I fancied I had set apart—and with which I believed nothing could interfere. I feel

now—my recent sufferings have taught me, that this was more than half imaginary—the romance of an unoccupied mind—but at the same time, I will not deny that, if I found in my mother, a kind and tender friend—if she realized, in any degree, the vision I have long had of her, I should—oh ! how gladly and thankfully, lay my weary head upon her bosom, nestle closely to her heart—thrust out as I am, from that one which, more than all, I could have clung to, to recover which, I should esteem no sacrifice of earthly happiness too great. But listen still, my good and patient Margey, and do not think that I am forgetting your long-tried affection—or that I could, however, cherished by another be indifferent to your precious love and sympathy. I cannot separate you from myself, Margaret, in any plans I form. If my mother, when she knows my wretched history, still calls me to her side, still wishes her home to be mine ; then, my own Margey, you will come too—at least, until another claims you.”

Margaret did not blush now, but she replied with grave earnestness in her voice.

“What you propose, dear, would be quite impossible for many reasons. I need only state one. Your mother certainly would not invite me; and I, as certainly, could not go unasked.”

“Then what have you thought of doing in such a case as this?” said Edith, much astonished that her plan could be, for a moment, considered unreasonable; and resolving still in her own mind, to accomplish it.

“A home has been offered me, if we are separated, Edith, with our kind friends at Fernley Cottage. This I should, at all events, accept for the present.”

“Yes; yes, I see it plainly—till you exchange it for one at the Fernley Rectory. Well, dear Margey, may you only be as happy as you deserve to be. I had a presentiment of this from the first Sunday Mr. Howard preached in his predeces-

sor's place, and when you spoke so enthusiastically about his sermon,

Margaret neither confirmed nor denied her sister's suspicions ; and Edith saw that, whatever secrets she might have, it was not her intention to disclose them now. And, for that day, their discussions of the future were ended.

END OF VOL. II.







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